

The Assistant as Immigrant Fiction

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The Assistant is immigrant fiction. Though it is less social-oriented than immigrant fiction such as Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* and Michael Gold's *Jews without Money*, social reality is reflected, in some measure, in the sensibility of characters in the novel, their way of thinking, and in the representation of social atmosphere. Our aim in section one and two is to consider to what extent immigrant Jews in the book are influenced by alien values. In the final section Malamud's double consciousness as a Jew and an American will be discussed in terms of his style and the narrative point of view employed in his immigrant stories. The quality of Malamud's sensibility as a Jewish American writer will be also treated briefly in connection with representation of social sentiment.

I

The Assistant is a story about Morris Bober, a first-generation immigrant Jew from Russia. He lives twenty-odd years in New York and dies as a social failure in a foreign land which is called America, "second chance for mankind."¹ His predicament in the New World is shown in a realistic manner, the miserable situation of his grocery store fully detailed, and his suffering given humanistic significance.

Malamud portrays Morris as a failure in a success-oriented society. What this implies is that, though a failure, Morris is not a failure in a moral, spiritual sense. To show this, Malamud juxtaposes him with other immigrant Jews: Julius Karp, Sam Pearl and to these we may add Charlie Sobeloff, all seem to be first-generation and successful, some through sheer fortune and some through shrewdness. To be sure, these three characters are foils and their worldliness accentuates Morris's virtue. Brought into contrast are their mentality and financial situation.

Portraits of Sam Pearl and Julius Karp are projected on the screen first through Helen's point of view:

Sam, always sociable, a former cabbie, bulky, wearing bifocals and chewing gum, beamed at her. . . Most of the day he sat hunched over dope sheets spread out on the soda fountain counter, smoking as he chewed gum, making smeary marks with a pencil stub under horses' names.²

Around the corner, through the many-bottled window that blinked in neon "KARP wines and liquors," she glimpsed paunchy Julius Karp, with bushy eyebrows and an ambitious mouth, blowing imaginary dust off a bottle as he slipped a deft fifth of something into a paper bag. . . (15-16)

The way Malamud describes Sam and Julius leaves us the impression that they are somewhat offending, both in their features and outlook and in their easy-going and egotistic manner. Morris regards Julius as

“insensitive and a blunderer” (23), “a crass and stupid person who had fallen through luck into flowing prosperity” (148). Also characteristic of Julias is his suspiciousness, which we find in his following observation: “It was the nature of clerks to steal from those they were working for” (150). Morris’s view of Sam Pearl may be summarized by a lack of his tragic sense: “What did the other [Sam] know the tragic quality of life? Wisdom flew over his hard head” (18).

Charlie Sobeloff is Morris’s “old partner, a cross-eyed, but clever conniver” (204). He has, “behind his back, cheated, manipulated, stolen whatever lay loose” (205). Morris, however, is by nature unable to hold a grudge for long and “has lost the hatred of the man” (205). In contrast to the crudeness peculiar to Julias, Sam, and Charlie are Morris’s good-naturedness and honesty. Honesty, along with endurance, is the sum and substance of Morris Bober. It is such that he “could not escape his honesty, it was bedrock; to cheat would cause an explosion in him, yet he trusted cheaters — coveted nobody’s nothing and always got poorer. . . He was Morris Bober and could be nobody more fortunate” (16).

What distinguishes Morris from the other three characters furthermore is their financial situation. While Morris combs his hair “with broken combs,” trudges “with sloping shoulders and bushy gray hair in need of a haircut” (17), Charlie by contrast wears silk shirts, and Julias stays “all day in silk pajamas” (22). While Morris’s living room is “colorless and cramped and barren,” his daughter’s bedroom “another impossibility,” his store “always a marginal one, up today and down tomorrow — as the wind blew” (10), Charlie’s huge supermarket is so crowded with people that it looks like “a huge department store” (207), and Julias has become “astonishingly successful and retired his overweight wife from the meager railroad flat above the house to a big house on the Parkway — from which she hardly ever stepped forth — the house complete with two-car garage and Mercury” (16). What is significant here is that success is not only shown in terms of wealth, but measured by geographical distance from their originally inhabited place.³ Passages from Alfred Kazin’s *A Walker in the City* and Norman Podhoretz’s *Making It* naturally come to mind, both referring to success as distancing from where they were born:

They were New York, the Gentiles, America; we were Brownsville — Brunzvil, as the old folks said — the dust of the earth to all Jews with money, and notoriously a place that measured all success by our skill in getting away from it.⁴

One of the longest journey in the world is the journey from Brooklin to Manhattan — or at least from certain neighborhood in Brooklin to certain part of Manhattan.⁵

To show Sam, Julias, and Charlie as a success is to emphasize the assimilation they have achieved in America. It seems that these three characters, though first-generation, are considerably Americanized in their manner and thinking: one of them is always chewing gum and their common goal is to make money. The upshot of this is that they are living in their new environment without keen inner conflict.

Morris, on the other hand, is tortured not only by poverty, sickness, and ill-fortune, but by a sense of dispossession and unfulfillment. His sense of dispossession seems to be related to his uprooted experience as an immigrant and his sense of unfulfillment to a new life that has never come true.

The sense of dispossession may be illuminated in the light of culture shock which the immigrants experienced in an alien culture. How painful it was is elucidated by Irving Howe in his *World of Our Fathers*, a prodigiously documented study of the life of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. He

explains it as three kinds of change combined. First of all

a physical uprooting from the long-familiar setting of small town life in Eastern Europe to the wastes and possibilities of urban America; second, a severe rupture from and sometimes grave dispossession of the moral values and cultural supports of the Jewish tradition; and third, a radical shift in class composition, mostly a sudden enforced proletarianization: Any one of these alone would have been painful; the three together made a culture shock from which it would take many immigrants years to recover. Some never did.⁶

What Howe calls "a physical uprooting" is found in the following scene in which Morris remembers his boyhood in Russia:

As a boy, always running in the muddy, rutted streets of the village, or across the fields, or bathing with other boys in the river: but as a man, in America, he rarely saw the sky (5-6).

What is contrasted here is Morris as a boy playing in the open air and Morris as a man imprisoned in a big city. The Old World is associated with openness and nature, where you can see, hear, touch, and smell its physical presence, while the New World is associated with imprisonment and opaque urbanity. "Before emigration," says Oscar Handlin in his *The Uprooted*, "they had lived in contact with nature, never much removed from the presence of the objects of the physical universe." The trees, the meadows, the stars, fire and water, even clouds and stones had being.⁷ Of course it is dangerous to romanticize the Old World because it is the very place from which they escaped in search of a new and better life. It may be said, however, that "it [shtetl] was a thoroughly known place where one's ancestors lay buried" as Howe remarks.⁸

The sense of unfulfillment may first be discussed in its cultural context. It stems mainly from the unfulfilled hope, the lost hope for a better life in America. Presumably enough, Morris crossed the sea with a hope for security, freedom, change, tranquility, and for self-betterment. "The United States," says David Levinsky, the protagonist of Cahan's classic immigrant fiction, "lured me not only as a land of milk and honey, but also, and perhaps chiefly as one of mystery, of fantastic experiences, of marvelous transformations."⁹ What Morris finds in America, however, is not "a land of milk and honey" but instead poverty, worries, imprisonment, holdupniks, and the death of his beloved son. The following reveals disillusion and sense of imprisonment and disorientation he experiences in the land of second chance: "He had hoped much in America and got little" (27); "He had escaped out of the Russian Army to the U. S. A., but once in a store he was like a fish in deep fat" (83). His life in America

was meager, the world changed for the worse. America had become too complicated. One man counted for nothing. There were too many stores, depressions, anxieties. What had he escaped to here (206)?

Morris escapes out of Russia where "a dead Jew is of less consequence than a live one" (82) to America where one man counts for nothing. Dreams shrink into harsh realities. Sighing becomes his habit. Sadness becomes his companion.

Since *The Assistant* is concerned with what a first-generation immigrant Jew finds in America, it may be compared briefly with Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* from which I have quoted above and Michael

Gold's *Jews without Money*.

The Rise of David Levinsky offers a striking contrast to *The Assistant* and *Jews without Money*. While the Bobers in *The Assistant* and immigrant Jews in Gold's autobiographical novel are social failures, Levinsky by contrast climbs the ladder of success and becomes a millionaire. The irony is that Levinsky, though wealthy, is pursued by loneliness and when he asks himself if he is happy, he has to answer in the negative. He achieves success, but success demands its sacrifice.

If *The Rise of David Levinsky* is a success story with irony in it, *Jews without Money* is "characterized by this frantic religiosity without God, this sense of the holiness of violence."¹⁰ A picture presented before us is the Jewish ghetto permeated by poverty, disease, crime, violence, death, and disillusion. Nathan Straus, a narrator's father moans his misfortunes and curses America:

"Look at me" he said. "Twenty years in America, and poorer than when I came. A suspender shop I had, and it was stolen from me by a villain. A housepainter I became, and fell off a scaffold. Now bananas I sell, and even at that I am a failure. It's all luck."¹¹

A curse on Columbus! A curse on America, the thief! It is a land where the lice make fortunes, and the good men starve!¹²

When compared with Gold's novel, though sadness is undeniably there, neither curse nor embittered anger is felt in Malamud's immigrant fiction. The dominant tone of the story is sadness. While in *Jews without Money* the emphasis is placed on immigrants as victims of social environment, in *The Assistant* it is on an immigrant's honesty and dogged endurance in the teeth of severe hardships. "If the Bober store is a grave," says Sidney Richman, "it is one in which, on occasion, people embrace."¹³

The sense of an "unlived life" which settles on Morris results more specifically from the chance of education he has given up. When the immigrants landed America, the first step they probably had to take was to learn English. Sure enough, it was a necessary step to assimilation, a necessary means to climb "the ladder of advancement" as Kazin put it in his autobiography.¹⁴ Levinsky enrolls in a public night school where he learns English from Bender, his English teacher of German descent, later to become Levinsky's right-hand man. Harry the Pimp, an owner of a gambling house in *Jews without Money*, harps on the importance of learning English: "One can make much money here, but first one must learn to speak English. That is what I am always preaching to our Jews; learn English; become an American."¹⁵ Morris, too, seems to recognize English as an important key to entry into America, a means of self-betterment. He tells Frank that he "went for a year in night school" where he "took algebra, also German and English" (83). However, he did not have the patience to stay and gave up his chance. His conclusive remarks account for remorse, a sense of unaccomplishment which he cannot possibly get rid of: "Without education you are lost" (83).

Morris is called "the book's exemplar of Judaism" by Leslie Fiedler.¹⁶ Though he neither abhors ham, nor goes to the synagogue, nor keeps kitchen kosher, he believes in the Jewish Law and the values he abides by are securely based on the spirit of the Jewish tradition. This makes him a good Jew. "This [the Law] means," says Morris to Frank, "to do what is right, to be honest, to be good" (124). As Nathan Glazer states in his *American Judaism*, what counts in Judaism is not abstract demand to seek faith, to find God, but concrete example of good and holy life.¹⁷ That Morris is the exemplar of a good

Jew is testified by a rabbi in the funeral scene, the climax of the novel:

To him I will say, 'Yes, Morris Bober was to me a true Jew because he lived in the Jewish experience, which he remembered, and with the Jewish heart.' Maybe not to our formal tradition — for this I don't excuse him — but he was true to the spirit of our life — to want for others that which he also wants for himself. He followed the Law which God gave Moses on Sinai and told him to bring to the people. He suffered, he endured, but with hope (229).

Morris's values are stable. It is true that he is not a success in an ordinary sense, but he is more human and humane than any other character in the book. What is compared is humanistic values embodied in Morris as opposed to successful assimilation into materialism represented by Sam, Julius, and Charlie.

II

Just as Morris is juxtaposed with other immigrant Jews, so Helen is placed side by side with second-generation Jews: Louis Karp and Nat Pearl. In what follows, we find Helen contrasted with Nat:

Why should he? — magna cum laude, Columbia, now in law school, she only a high school graduate with a year's evening college credit mostly in lit; he with first rate prospects; also rich friends he had never bothered to introduce her to; she as poor as her name sounded, with little promise of a better future (14).

Nat is handsome, cleft-chinned, gifted and like his father, ambitious. Interestingly enough, a cleft-chinned person seems to appeal to Malamud's imagination. Orlando Krantz in "The Maid's Shoes," for instance, is described as a nervous man of sixty with "a mild gray eye, a broad mouth, and a pointed cleft chin."¹⁸ What Nat shares with Orlando Krantz is his nervousness. It is possibly related to their academic background.

Louis Karp is a pop-eyed, "Let's-drop-this-deep-philosophy" type of simple young man. The following shows his character as well as his relaxed way of living:

In high school, before he quit, he had worn his wet hair slicked straight back. One day, after studying a picture of a movie actor in the *Daily News*, he had run a part across his head. This was as much change as she had known in him. If Nat Pearl was ambitious, Louis made a relaxed living letting the fruit of his father's investment fall into his lap (41).

Helen, then, is contrasted with Nat in terms of educational background and prospects and with Louis in terms of financial situation. Deprived of a chance to go to college, Helen, like her father, suffers a sense of unaccomplishment. When her friends graduate from college, she envies them and feels "ashamed how little she was accomplishing" (42) and she stops seeing them. She also shares a sense of lost youth with her father. With Morris this sense of lost youth reveals itself in "the dead weight of hours, mostly sad memories of his lost years of youth" (77) and with Helen it appears in a remark she makes: "Wonderful things might happen, and when you get up in the morning you feel they will: That's

what youth means, and that's what I've lost" (43). Like father, like daughter.

Though financially handicapped, Helen decides to go to college and towards the end of the story we find her attending a college with the "assistance" of Frank Alpine. Respect for learning strongly characterizes Helen and her father who, we find, even in his dream is saying to Ephraim, his dead son, "Don't worry, I'll give you a fine college education" (226). What we find in Morris and Helen seems to be essential to the Jewish tradition. The Jew are people of books and words. "All through the late nineteenth and early twentieth century," observes Howe, "learning came to seem an almost magical solution for the Jews, a people that has always placed an enormous faith in the sheer power of words."¹⁹

Together with a craving for education, what we find impressive in the book is the significance of the family. Nathan Glazer points out that Jews are more family-centered than any other group in America and that there are fewer adult Jews outside of families than is the case among Americans. "Judaism," according to Glazer, "was in large measure being re-created for children."²⁰ In his unique autobiography Philip Roth also refers to the significance of the family half-sarcastically:

In our lore, the Jewish family was an inviolate haven against every form of menace from personal isolation to gentile hostility. Regardless of internal friction and strife, it was assumed to be an indissoluble consolidation. Hear, O Israel, the family is God, the family is One. Family indivisibility, the first commandment.²¹

The indivisibility of the Jewish family, however, was exposed to alien values and as years went by from the first-generation to the second, to the third, the family solidarity had to show signs of strain and coming apart. "No social arrangement as inherently delicate as the family," argues Howe, "could withstand the assaults that came from all sides — from the school, the street, the theater, the gangs, the shops, the gentile world, all seeming united in trying to rip apart the fabric of Jewish life."²²

How much does Malamud's immigrant fiction reflect the social reality observed by Howe? To what extent is Helen as a second-generation Jew exposed to, and influenced by, alien values? How deep is the gap between her and her parents?

That Helen is Americanized to a degree is revealed when she thinks of intermarriage:

He wasn't for instance, Jewish. Not too long ago this was the greatest barrier, her protection against ever taking him seriously; now it no longer seemed such an urgently important thing — how could it in times like these? How could anything be important but love and fulfillment? It had lately come to her that her worry he was a gentile was less for her own sake than for her mother and father (132).

Intermarriage, as Glazer observes, was opposed even by radical reformers.²³ It is a sure sign of acculturation and Helen, when she gives priority to love rather than the Jewish tradition, seems to be on the side American values. But we must dive deeper to a little lower layer. Though modernized and Americanized in thinking, her sensibility, it seems to me, is deeply colored by Jewishness. When she compares Frank and Nat as a potential husband, she comes to favor Frank:

Nat Pearl wanted to be "something," but to him this meant making money to lead the life of some of his well-to-do friends at law school. Frank on the other hand was struggling to realize himself as a person, a more worthwhile ambition (133).

The paradox here is that Helen prefers Frank simply because Frank seems to Helen, though a gentile, to be closer to the Jew in emotion and sensibility than Nat. Frank is a gentile more Jewish than Nat. He is a gentile Jew with "a hooked nose." While Nat is influenced by "American materialism" in the sense that success and money become his ultimate goal and education a means to achieve that goal, Frank, on the other hand, has a sincere and real hunger for meaning and education which is its own end. It is no surprise, therefore, that Helen identify herself with Frank since she shares with Frank loneliness, sensibility, and craving for self-realization. Morris likewise finds something similar to himself in Frank when he thinks that "I am sixty and he talks like me" (37).

What does Helen think of her father? It is most clearly shown in the funeral scene:

He's overdone it, she thought. I said Papa was honest but what was the good of such honesty if he couldn't exist in the world? Yes, he ran after this poor woman to give her back a nickel but he also trusted cheaters who took away what belonged to him. Poor Papa; being naturally honest, he didn't believe that others come by their dishonesty naturally. And he couldn't hold onto those things he had worked so hard to get. He gave away, in a sense, more than he owned. He was no saint; he was in a way weak, his only true strength in his sweet nature and understanding. He knew at least what was good. . . People liked him, but who can admire a man passing his life in such a store? He buried himself in it; he didn't have the imagination to know what he was missing. He made himself a victim. He could, with a little more courage, have been more than he was (230).

Helen is aware of her father's virtue, goodness, honesty, sweetness and true understanding, but she is also aware that his honesty is another name for weakness in the world where honesty is not the best policy. Here she is looking at her father's limitations with critical tenderness, but is she mature enough to see what makes Morris really heroic? If honesty is another name for weakness, limitation, we may say, is another name for strength, and this limitation makes us truly human and humane.

Helen's relations with her mother revolve around marriage. For Ida a good marriage is synonymous with a Jew who can bring financial security. "Marry somebody," says Ida, "who can give you a better life, a nice professional boy with a college education" (148). Intermarriage is out of the question — "the college was not the synagogue, a B. A. not a bar mitzvah" (132) — and when she finds Frank and Helen kissing, she cries and says "You are not ashamed that you kissed a goy?" (145). Behind her view of marriage seems to lie a practical sense nourished by the Jewish tradition. When her family is in extreme poverty, she even thinks that "things would be better if she got married" (201). It is her practical view of marriage that makes her critical of Helen's preoccupation with reading and complain that "Some people want their children to read more. I want you to read less" (155). The implication, of course, is that reading does not bring you happiness and money and that for a woman marriage is more important than the pursuit of knowledge.

Ida's attitude towards marriage reminds us of the section which Howe named "Girls in the Ghetto." It seems that women's position in Jewish society was rather low and girls with the hope of literary pursuits and independence, though the situation was gradually changing in America, were to confront the opposition of their parents. Howe gives us several examples, among which is a novelist, Anzia Yezierska (1885–1970). When her first book came out, her father pointed out that she had not been married. To quote Howe: "A woman alone, not a wife and not a mother, has no existence."²⁴

All in all, Ida seems to remain a stereotyped Jewish house-wife, while Morris is given multiple

dimensions in terms of characterization. Ida lacks, it seems to me, some emotional depth and personal complexity. When Kazin says of his mother that "I associated with that old European life only pain, mud, and hopelessness, but I was of it still, through her," we feel her motherhood, her presence.²⁵ Or when Katie, the narrator's mother in *Jews without Money* leaps with joy in Bronx Park crying, "I'm so happy in a forest! You American children don't know what it means! I am happy!" she immediately comes alive.²⁶ True, Ida cries, nags, and complains, but we scarcely know her. The role she plays is simply that of a "stimulator".

To sum up: Helen is contrasted with Nat and Louis to show her educational background and financial situation, which blights her self-respect on the one hand and evokes her yearning for education on the other. As a second-generation Jew, she is exposed to an alien culture, and is influenced by it to a degree that she considers that intermarriage is not unthinkable, but deep down she remains a Jew in sensibility. Between her and her parents there is some sort of gap, there is a certain shamed-feeling about her family's financial situation on the part of Helen, there is Ida's strong opposition to Helen's dating with a gentile, but by and large there is little strife and friction and there is no single sign to indicate that her parents feel their daughter "a strange creature in their home."²⁷

III

In his autobiography *The Facts*, we find Roth speaking of his identity as a Jewish American:

Not only did growing up Jewish in Newark in the thirties and forties, Hebrew school and all, feel like a perfectly legitimate way of growing up American but, what's more, growing up Jewish as I did and growing up American seemed to me indistinguishable.²⁸

Just as growing up a Jew and growing up an American are indistinguishable to Roth, so Malamud acknowledges that he experiences himself both as a Jew and as an American. Malamud, according to Joel Salzberg, has granted more than thirty interviews and in one of them he refers to his double identity:²⁹

I'm an American, I'm Jew, and I write for all men. . . I write about Jews, when I write about Jews, because they set my imagination going. I know something about their history, the quality of their experience and belief and of their literature, though not as much as I would like. . . I respond in particular to the East European immigrants of my father's and mother's generation; many of them were Jews of the Pale as described by the classic Yiddish writers. . . Sometimes I make characters Jewish because I think I will understand them better as people not because I am out to prove anything. That's qualification. Still another is that, as a writer, I've been influenced by Hawthorne, James, Mark Twain, Hemingway, more than I have been by Sholem Aleichem, and I. L. Peretz whom I read with pleasure.³⁰

How does his double consciousness as a Jew and as an American express itself? It seems that it is reflected in his style, the point of view he employs in immigrant stories such as *The Assistant* and "The German Refugee."

Of Malamud's style, a succinct summary is made by Philip Rahv in his introduction to *A Malamud Reader*:

Malamud's Jewishness is also connected with a certain stylization of language we find in his fiction, a deliberate linguistic effort at once trenchantly and humourously adapting the cool Wasp idiom in English to the quicker heartbeats and greater openness to emotion of his Jewish characters; and it is particularly in the turns and twists of their dialogue that this effort is most apparent and successful. . . he refuses to censor their bad laughable grammar, distorted syntax, and vivid yet comical locution that sounds like apt imitation of Yiddish.³¹

The following examples chosen from *The Assistant* would be enough to show how acute Rahv's observation is:

"What is the picnic?" (8)

"I asked you special" (9).

"You should sell long ago the store" (18).

"Monday will open two Norwegians" (172).

We may call Malamud's style, after Howe's term, "Yiddished English" and obviously enough, it reflects "internal bilingualism" which the child of immigrants from East Europe experiences. This "double experience of language is especially significant to an author and poet," since it may "give a heightened sensitivity to language, a sense of idiom, and a sense of how much expresses itself through colloquialism."³²

The second issue to be discussed is the narrative point of view Malamud employs in his stories. While in immigrant fiction like *The Rise of David Levinsky* and *Jews without Money*, the narration is in the first-person and the narrator is also a character in the story. The narrator-character tells directly what has happened to him. In Malamud's *The Assistant*, on the other hand, the narration is in the third-person and the story is told from an omniscient point of view, that is to say, unlike Michael and Levinsky who tell their own experience as an immigrant and as an immigrant's child, Morris does not tell us his immigrant experience as a first-person narrator although he occasionally "narrates." The result is that it has less immediacy than immigrant fiction told in first-person and the way we feel and experience his experience is, in a strange way, filtered as if there were some transparent veil, through which we see what is going on. Each scene is rendered realistically, but we experience a sort of detachment from the scene. To take another example. "The German Refugee" is a story about a refugee named Oskar Gassner. The story is constructed in such a way that Oskar cannot be the narrator, since he commits suicide at the end of the story. The narrator is Martin Goldberg, possibly a second-generation Jew who tells about the suffering and anguish of Oskar, the refugee. In "Black Is My Favorite Color," Nat Lime, a Jew bachelor is the narrator-character, but he is not a first-generation immigrant Jew. Though Malamud has shown interest in Jews, especially in the first-generation from East Europe as he testifies in the interview, it rarely happens that the first-generation immigrants tell their own experience. Instead their experience is looked at and told either in the first person, most often by a second-generation Jew, or in the third-person which takes an omniscient point of view. What we feel from the way Malamud renders the narrative point of view is the author's sense of detachment from his characters. And this, I think, reflects Malamud as a second-generation writer — an American rather than a Jew or a Jew strongly affected by American experience, who is looking at the world of his fathers. This rendering of the narrative point of view may be viewed in a broader context and we find it in Mark Shechner's essay:

Thus Jewish fiction in America arose in an interregnum between the experience of the Old World, where the Jew were hemmed in by poverty and exclusion, but united by traditions and a sense of common destiny, and then full participation in the New. By and large the values of this fiction have been *neither traditionally Jewish nor comfortably American*; it has tended to speak for *those ironic middle grounds* that were illuminated by the light that fulfillments shed upon hopes, and real fates upon millenaries.³³ (Italics mine)

The relationship between social reality and Malamud's sensibility is the final case in point. Social reality in Malamud's fiction is referred to as "social thinness" by Theodore Solotaroff and deplored by Philip Roth as "Malamud's invention." Roth's observation is worth quoting in full:

The Jews of *The Magic Barrel* and the Jews of *The Assistant* are not the Jews of New York City or Chicago. They are Malamud's invention, a metaphor of sorts to stand for certain possibilities and promises, and I am further inclined to believe this when I read the statement attributed to Malamud which goes, "All men are Jews." In fact, we know this is not so. But Malamud, as a writer of fiction, has not shown specific interest in the anxieties and dilemmas and corruptions of the contemporary American Jews, the Jews we think of characteristic of our times. Rather, his people live in a timeless depression and a placeless Lower East Side; their society is not affluent, their predicament is not cultural. I am not saying — one cannot, of Malamud — that he has spurned life or on examination of its difficulties. What it is to be human, and to be humane, is his deepest concern. What I do mean to point out is that he does not — or has not yet — found the contemporary scene a proper or sufficient backdrop for his tales of heartlessness and heartache of suffering and regeneration.³⁴

Roth's observation is incisively to the point and we find it hard to deny the authenticity of his remarks. It would seem that despite the fact that Malamud has tried to integrate into his picture various elements such as Jewish materials and historical facts (miscellaneous jobs and nationalities, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, Yiddish plays, Yiddish radio programs, a burial society, tea they drink etc.) the picture Malamud has drawn might be, from a socio-historical point of view, unconvincing for those who are familiar with the Jewish quarters. Indeed it may be so even for a foreign student once he has been exposed to immigrant fiction by other authors. Still, social reality is shown not only in the respects we have examined, but also in the representation of social sentiments: sadness and melancholy. Sadness and melancholy, it may be said, are sentiments peculiarly Jewish in the ghetto, of which Kazin speaks as "damp sadness of the place."³⁵

If Bober's grocery store is the reflection of the collective Jewish sentiment, it is also the reflection of a writer's state of mind. Bober's store is at once a social expression of the Jewish sentiment and an extension of Malamud's state of mind.³⁶ Thus, *The Assistant*, we may say, is Malamud's house of fiction in which we find a mirror serving two purposes. It reflects the author's state of mind, his sensibility, and the quality of his imagination and at the same time it reflects the sentiment of the Jewish ghetto, "a state of mind" of the Jewish people.³⁷ Though the mirror in the Bober house is "cracked," the mirror in Malamud's house of fiction is well-polished and tempts readers to look into it.

Notes

- 1 Alfred Kazin, *A Writer's America: Landscape in Literature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), p. 7.
- 2 Bernard Malamud, *The Assistant* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1957), p. 16. All subsequent page references are to this edition and further references will appear in brackets in the text.
- 3 Cf. Iska Alter, *The Goodman's Dilemma: Social Criticism in the Fictions of Bernard Malamud* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1981), p. 10.
- 4 Alfred Kazin, *A Walker in the City* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951), p. 12.
- 5 Norman Podhoretz, *Making It* (New York: Harper & Row Publisher, 1967), p. 3.
- 6 Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Have Found and Made* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), p. 115.
- 7 Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1973), p. 86.
- 8 Howe, p. 116.
- 9 Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917; New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1960), p. 61.
- 10 Leslie Fiedler, *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler* Vol. II. (New York: Stein & Day, 1971), p. 90.
- 11 Michael Gold, *Jews without Money* (1930; New York: Corral & Graf, 1984), p. 131.
- 12 Gold, p. 112.
- 13 Sidney Richman, *Bernard Malamud* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1966), p. 51.
- 14 Kazin, *A Walker in the City*, p. 22.
- 15 Gold, p. 29.
- 16 Fiedler, p. 329.
- 17 Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 135, 148, 150.
- 18 Bernard Malamud, *The Stories of Bernard Malamud* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983), p. 111.
- 19 Howe, p. 246.
- 20 Glazer, pp. 121–122.
- 21 Philip Roth, *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988), p. 14.
- 22 Howe, p. 177.
- 23 Glazer, p. 54.
- 24 Howe, p. 269. In connection with this is an account of Mark Zbrowski and Elizabeth Herzog quoted by Evelyn Gross Avery, which goes "If a man is not a husband and a father, then he is nothing. A woman who is not a wife and mother is not a 'real' woman." See Evelyn Gross Avery, *Rebels and Victims: The Fiction of Richard Wright and Bernard Malamud* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1979), p. 58.
- 25 Kazin, *A Walker in the City*, pp. 58–59.
- 26 Gold, p. 155. Marcus Klein refers to this scene and argues in his *Foreigners* that what immigrants longed for was the garden from which they have been dispossessed, not money. See Marcus Klein, *Foreigners: The Making of American Literature 1900–1940* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981). p. 188.
- 27 Refer to the following remarks by Podhoretz: "As, indeed my mother herself was, for often in later year I had become a writer and an editor and was living only a subway ride away but in a style that was foreign to her and among people by whom she was intimidated — she would gaze wistfully at *this strange creature*, her son. . ." (Italics mine) See Podhoretz, p. 24.
- 28 Roth, p. 122.
- 29 Joel Salzman, ed., *Critical Essays on Bernard Malamud* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987), pp. 3–4.
- 30 George Plimpton, ed., *The Paris Review Interviews: Writers at Work: Sixth Series* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1984), pp. 162–163.
- 31 Philip Rahv, "Introduction" to *A Malamud Reader* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967). ix-x.
- 32 Howe, p. 586.

- 33 Mark Shechner, "Jewish Writers" in *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Literature*, ed. Daniel Hoffman (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 195.
- 34 Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), pp. 127-128.
- 35 Kazin, p. 5.
- 36 Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (1949; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1978), p. 221.
- 37 Henry L. Feingold, *Zion in America: The Jewish Experience from Colonial Times to the Present* (Hippocrene Books, Ltd., 1974), p. 129.