

Bernard Malamud and Minimalists

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I. Introduction

Bernard Malamud, who was born in 1914 to the Jewish immigrant parents from Russia, tried to struggle his way through to become a writer at a shabby quarter of Brooklyn. His first novel, *The Natural*, was published in 1952 but could not draw much attention not only to the public but to critics. After the publication of his second novel, *The Assistant*, in 1957, however, he fortunately got to be regarded as one of the most promising writers. In 1958 his first collection of short stories entitled *The Magic Barrel*, and in 1966 his fourth novel, *The Fixer*, came out. Some American major book awards were given to him one after another by these two works in about ten years following the publication of *The Assistant*. He also won the honor of a first-class writer in America. At the same time, many other conspicuous Jewish writers came into the American literary world of the nineteen-fifties and -sixties.¹⁾ They were often treated as a group, and generally said to have brought in what you call the Jewish Writers' Age. Thereafter, he kept his position of a forefront writer, and wrote four novels and four collections of short stories after all, through the prime years of Post-Modernists, by the end of the nineteen-seventies.

In the nineteen-eighties, young writers,²⁾ who are graduates from creative writing courses of colleges, began to lead the van of the American literary world. Though they neither write with the same

literary conception nor have the same styles, they are called with a name, as if they were just in a clan—the New Lost Generation; the Zero Generation; or Minimalists. In short, in the decline of contemporary American literature in popularity, some publishers managed to forge the group. They are in an illusional trend in a sense. Originally they were the writers used for the publishers' commercial sake.

In this trend Bernard Malamud's last novel, *God's Grace*, was published in 1982. Four years later, he passed away on March 18, 1986. Now, when we compare the work with his first attention-getter, *The Assistant*, we find the same style basically in them, although it differs in degree as much as he has grown in terms of authorship. On the other hand, we can see a difference between them regarding his so-called fabulation. All things considered, I am going to analyze *God's Grace*, against Minimalists' works.

II. Characters in Bernard Malamud's Works

When we take Malamud's works into consideration, above all *The Assistant* and *The Magic Barrel* (1958), the initial matter we will come upon must be his Jewishness.³⁾ To be brief, it is generalized ordinariness in the immigrant people's nation, although I have written regarding it in a paper before. It is something like in a Jewish painter, Marc Chagall's atmosphere of art. In Malamud's works Jewishness functions as a type of metaphor both for the tragic dimention of anyone's life and for a code of personal morality.⁴⁾

Secondarily, we have to bear his realistic form in mind. As for it we can trace down to Ernest Hemingway. It is naturally backed up with Hemingway-like concise writing style. In addition, we can go, needless to say, back to Mark Twain along the history of American literature in this sense.

Thirdly, one of his distinct characteristics is said to be symbolism called "tableau."⁵ It is a kind of literary device. The writer keeps the ending or conclusion of a story in a stream undecidedly pending, without giving a decisive direction to the story-telling. Therefore, the reader has to think out a proper answer for himself. For example, in *The Assistant*, we can not tell whether or not Frank will marry Helen happily in future:

St. F. stopped in front of the grocery, and reaching into the garbage can, plucked the wooden rose out of it. He tossed it into the air and it turned into a real flower that he caught in his hand. With a bow he gave it to Helen, who had just come out of the house. "Little sister, here is your little sister the rose." From him she took it, although it was with the love and best wishes of Frank Alpine.

One day in April Frank went to the hospital and had himself circumcised. For a couple of days he dragged himself around with a pain between his legs. The pain enraged and inspired him. After Passover he became a Jew.⁶

This kind of device comes up to Malamud's short stories more often than not in his novels; in "The Lady of the Lake" we get a mysterious feeling as follows:

"Isabella—"he cried brokenly. "Listen, I—I am —"

He groped for her breasts, to clutch, kiss or suckle them; but she had stepped among the statues, and when he vainly sought her in the veiled mist that had risen from the lake, still calling her name, Freeman embraced only moonlit stone.⁷

In "Angel Levin," we feel it metaphysical rather than mysterious:

A feather drifted down. Manishevitz gasped as it turned white, but it was only snowing.

He rushed downstairs. In the flat Fanny wielded a dust mop under the bed and then upon the cobwebs on the wall.

"A wonderful thing, Fanny," Manishevitz said. "Believe me, there are Jews

everywhere."⁸⁾

These are the three major characteristics in Malamud's works. We have repeatedly heard of them. Now, in the nineteen-nineties, those remind us of Minimalists' works. They are no doubt popular Minimalists' characteristics as well. When we analyze Malamud's *God's Grace*, which was published in the Minimalists' prime period, we have to look over their ideas or concepts for story-writing. In the following chapter the similar points between Malamud's and Minimalists' works will be stated.

III. Bernard Malamud and Minimalists

First of all I will proceed an analysis on Minimalists and their distinctive features. They are called the New Lost Generation or Zero Generation in other ways. These names are, however, given with no overt reasons and definitions. Each difference is no more considered among those writers than among the ones under the name of Jewish writers, including Malamud, Saul Bellow, I. B. Singer and so on. The only one thing they have in common is, if any, their academic careers. Many of them studied how to write stories at a creative writing course of college. Among them are Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Jay McInerney and David Leavitt. As for their works, many negative criticisms prevail; they have nothing but weak and ill-complexioned literary space; and they have only pop-art-like irresponsible delicacy which is not powerful enough to endure anarchic and rough intensity of freedom. Moreover, they have confined themselves in their own little circle or in their personal conversation alone without trying to investigate contradictions of logics thoroughly.⁹⁾ In spite of these severe criticisms, it is interesting to know that even

in Japan a great many works by them are translated into Japanese and published one after another, and that some Japanese publishers issued a special number of magazine for them. For one thing, this trend was commercially forged by publishers themselves. One of them, Bret Easton Ellis, answered at an interview with a magazine, with respect to what he had wanted to write. He says; there is no answer from the beginning; and that it is easy to analyze but not to make an answer. Namely, all he can do is sketch a life with nothing in it in a long period of time.¹⁰⁾ We have to give attention to his statement as a Minimalist. For example, in David Leavitt's "Family Dancing" the ending goes as follows:

And though Herb's hand squeezes her shoulder, though he whispers in her ear, "It's all right, honey," all she feels is the terror of inertia, like the last time he ever pushed her on the swing. Higher and higher she went, as if his strength could disprove her fatness. "Daddy, stop!" she had screamed as the swing rose. "Stop, stop, I'm scared!" Her hands clutched the metal chains, her mouth opened. She wasn't scared of the height; she was scared of him, of how he kept pushing, as if the swing were magic, and by pushing he could change her forever into the pretty little girl he really wanted to be his partner.¹¹⁾

The dangling-ending device can be a kind of loquacious expression of blankness, of which Ihab Hassan writes in detail.¹²⁾ At this point Malamud comes up as their forerunner. Furthermore, we are sure to come across Ernest Hemingway as well.

The expression of blankness is originally a byproduct of concise form of writing. Even in our daily lives, when we try to write a concise sentence, we must rely on the reader's imaginative comprehension and come to adopt the device after all, with each one's difference of ability to adopt it rightly or not. In another way, it is correlated with the concise expression. Here we have to consider Henry James' idea of writing. According to him, there are two types

of movements of consciousness in writing stories. One is story-telling consciousness and the other story-presenting one. The former is related with the writer's subjectivity and the latter has a function to try to display matters as objectively as possible.¹³⁾ As we know here, Minimalists are likely to take a side with story-presenting.

The device of concise writing form, as stated above, falls into symbolism and ambiguity in meaning. In this sense, we can trace down to Malamud and further to Hemingway again.

The story-presenting consciousness flows to the writer's effort to cross out as many words as he can in search of simplicity. That is to say, it ends up in concise writing form, undermining meaningful symbolism. In Raymond Cover's "Where I'm Calling From," the very ending goes as follows:

He gets his fire going, but then something happens to it. A branchful of snow drops on it. It goes out. Meanwhile, it's getting colder. Night is coming on.

I bring some change out of my pocket. I'll try my wife first. If she answers, I'll wish her a Happy New Year. But that's it She'll ask me where I'm calling from, and I'll have to tell her. I won't say anything about New Year's resolutions. There's no way to make a joke out of this. After I talk to her, I'll call my girlfriend. Maybe I'll call her first. I'll just have to hope I don't get her kid on the line. "Hello, sugar," I'll say when she answers. "It's me."¹⁴⁾

Going back along the history of American literature, we understand that Malamud's "The Magic Barrel" ends in the same way as follows:

He appeared, carrying a small bouquet of violets and rosebuds. Stella stood by the lamp post, smoking. She wore white with red shoes, which fitted his expectations, although in a troubled moment he had imagined the dress red, and only the shoes white. She waited uneasily and shyly. From afar he saw that her eyes—clearly her father's—were filled with desperate innocence. He pictured, in her, his own redemption. Violins and lit candles revolved in the

sky. Leo ran forward with flowers outthrust.

Around the corner, Salzman, leaning against a wall, chanted prayers for the dead.¹⁵⁾

In addition, a little further back in it, we come across Hemingway. His very early short stories have this tendency as well; and "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" goes like this:

He disliked bars and bodegas. A clean, well-lighted café was a very different thing. Now, without thinking further, he would go home to his room. He would lie in the bed and finally, with daylight, he would go to sleep. After all, he said to himself, it is probably only insomnia. Many must have it.¹⁶⁾

Furthermore, we often hear of the criticism on the small world with which Minimalists deal as their daily territories. They create their fictional circumstances, keeping watchful of minimal matters and trivials on our value judgement. They are named after this trait. From this point of view their world is, of course, as realistic as we can regard it as vulgar. In *Less Than Zero* Bret Easton Ellis uses actual brand names, contemporary pop singers' names and song titles, and so on, incessantly here and there—as if they were the writer's timing rhyme. Among them are some Japanese items such as Beta Max and Toyota. In particular, there appear more than twenty pop singers' names: Elvis Costello, Eagles, David Bowie, Bob Seagar, Billy Idol, Psychedelic Furs, Doors, Oingo Boingo, Led Zeppelin, Bananalama, Duran Duran, Adam Ant, Sting, Fleet Wood Mac, etc. They were star musicians on Music TV, which stood steady in the eighties among the young. It is obvious that Bret Easton Ellis got a strong impression from MTV at least, although it is not sure that his fabulation was affected by it to some extent. To be brief, Minimalists' world in general is based on actuality upon an excessively personal

scale, or bound with realism with a trend of a personally-oriented extension of experience. It is associated with Malamud's world, although his has no pop sense in spite of his being sensitive to the times. Therefore we never feel vulgarity in any sense over his fictional world.

As for Minimalists' protagonists, they are usually lonely boys who are fundamentally negative and negligent of their states of lives. They also believe that they can never communicate their ideas to other people. In short, they are social defects, as well as the major American heroes like Huckleberry Finn, Holden in J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, and, Morris Bober and Frank Alpine in Malamud's *The Assistant*.

Speaking of realism, we must think about Minimalists' idea of reality. To them the daily life is not the other part against or opposite speciality, insanity, and/or irrationality, but the common flow of time combined with those two factors. Malamud is apt to give it the same concept. He regards Jewishness not as the special issue opposite to Americanism, but as a conception generalized without difficulty in the American reality. Similarly, many Minimalists are gay writers. They do not hide the fact, which would give them hard time ten years ago. They do not regard his sexual preference as specially different from others or extraordinary in their daily scenes. Such writers as Edmund White and Laford Wilson focus on gay people and try to write about their lives as non-special phase. They depict homosexuality as a generalized conception in the contemporary society, such as Malamud's Jewishness.

IV. On Malamud's *God's Grace*

Malamud is quite sensitive to the social movement and current of

the times and adopts them skillfully, overtly and covertly in his works. Accordingly, he can be said to be a keen-eyed writer fore-running the times.¹⁷⁾

In consideration of this, now we take up the study of Malamud's last novel, *God's Grace*. In the novel with the setting of future, a conversation between God and a man continues. After "the thermonuclear war between the Djanks and Druzhkies, in consequence of which they had destroyed themselves, and, madly, all other inhabitants of the earth, God spoke through a glowing crack in a bulbous black cloud to Calvin Cohn, the paleologist, who of all men had miraculously survived in a battered oceanography vessel with sails....."¹⁸⁾ The novel certainly has a form of science fiction, but we will be sure, after our careful reading, that it is a fantastic and legendary myth of our future. On the list of his works, we find a short story with the same kind of motif of God and a man: "The Mourners" in *The Magic Barrel*; and also short stories in which non-human characters mystically appear: "Angel Levine" in *The Magic Barrel*, "The Jewbird" in *Idiot's First* and "Talking Hourse" in *Rembrandt's Hat*. His treatment of those characters is symbolic in their own ways. Moreover, those above-mentioned works are overt examples of that line. As a whole most of his works, more or less, have this sort of tint. However, the most interesting fact is that Malamud created another work of that kind not in a short story but in a novel in the nineteen-eighties. We can find out his aggressive trial here as a professional writer. As stated above, we understand that in the novel he does not deal with God and non-reality as a contrast opposed to reality. He succeeds in keeping those two phases just inseparated and borderless in a single dimention, without fusing them into a new, artificial and unnatural phase. There is, no doubt, co-existence of

reality and non-reality in a natural daily life. Here on this stage, we never fail to find the ultimate accomplishment of his authorship after his thirty-years' career. From another point of view, it can safely be said that his fictional world is in accordance with Chagall's world of art. Basically, the same world that Malamud and Chagall respectively built is the typical prototype of the traditional Yiddish culture in Eastern Europe. It is said that the American publishing business has recently been low-keyed at large because of the advancement and diversity of new media. In this condition, consciously or unconsciously, he walked into the core of his ethnic identity or his mental entity. And, after his death his soul must have gone back to the Yiddish world at the very end.

NOTES

- 1) Irving Malin, *Jews and Americans* (Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1965).

Yoshifumi Oyamada, *American Jewish Writers* (Hyoronsha, Tokyo, 1976).

According to these two books above, we understand that there are too many outstanding Jewish Americans, if limited just in this century, not only in literature but in other fields, to refer to one name after another. Among them are Nathanael West (1903-1940), Harry Golden (1902-), Lionel Trilling (1905-), Delmore Schwartz (1911-), Karl Shapiro (1913-), Bernard Malamud (1914-1986), Irwin Shaw (1914-), Herbert Gold (1914-), Arthur Miller (1915-), Saul Bellow (1915-), Alfred Kazin (1915-), Leslie Fiedler (1917-), J.D. Salinger (1919-), Norman Mailer (1923-), Leon Uris (1924-), Allen Ginsberg (1926-), Chaim Potok (1929-), Philip Roth (1933-) in terms of men of letters.

- 2) Here is a list of writers who can be called "Minimalists," and their works.

Jay McInerney: *Bright Lights, Big City*

Bret Easton Ellis: *Less Than Zero*

David Leavitt: *Family Dancing*

Susan Minot: *Monkeys*

Mona Simpson: *Anywhere But Here*

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Madison Smartt Bell: *Washington Square Ensemble*

Joel Rose: *Kill the Poor*

Catherine Texier: *Love Me Tender*

Ann Beattie: *Burning House*

Raymond Carver: *Cathedral*

- 3) Robert Alter, "Jewishness as Metaphor," *Bernard Malamud and the Critics*, ed. Leslie and Joyce Field, (New York University Prss, New York, 1970).
- 4) Tadashi Yamauchi, "A Comparative Identification of Bernard Malamud," *The Journal of Chubu Women's College*, No. 18, December 1988.
- 5) Earl H. Rovit, "The Jewish Literary Tradition," *Bernard Malamud and the Critics*, (New York University Press, New York, 1970).
- 6) Bernard Malamud, *The Assistant*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1957).
- 7) Bernard Malamud, "The Lady of the Lake," *The Magic Barrel*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1958).
- 8) Bernard Malamud, "Angel Levine," *The Magic Barrel*.
- 9) David Leavitt, "The New Lost Generation," *Switch*, Special Issue, December 1988.
- 10) Toshiki Komazawa, "Nothing But Zero," *Switch*, Special Issue, December 1988.
- 11) David Leavitt, "Family Dancing," *Family Dancing*, (A Warner Communication Company, New York, 1982).
- 12) Ihab Hassan, *Silent Literature*, (Princeton, N.J., 1966).
- 13) Henry James, *Notes on Novelists*, (Penguin Books, London, 1914).
- 14) Raymond Carver, "Where I'm Calling From," *Where I'm Calling From*, (Vintage Contemporaries Vintage Books, Random House, Inc., New York, 1980).
- 15) Bernard Malamud, "The Magic Barrel," *The Magic Barrel*.
- 16) Ernest Hemingway, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, (Bantam Books, New York, 1923).
- 17) Tadashi Yamauchi, "A Comparison between Bernard Malamud's Milestone Novels—From a Life to Lives," *The Journal of General Sciences Institute*, Osaka University of Economics And Law, No. 9, April 1990.
- 18) Bernard Malamud, *God's Grace*, (Avon Books, New York, 1982).

