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Myth Inside and Out: Malamud's *The Natural*

FREDERICK W. TURNER, III

Critical comment on Bernard Malamud's most recent novel, *The Fixer*, has been strikingly uniform in its conviction that this work is one toward which all the writer's previous fiction has been pointing. V. S. Pritchett, writing in *The New York Review of Books*, notes that the "hero as sufferer and martyr is a characteristic Jewish theme, comic and tragic, and a continuing one in Malamud's novels."¹ George P. Elliott in *The New York Times Book Review* begins, "For quite a few years it has been clear that Bernard Malamud would be able to tell his story when he found it."² And Elliott goes on to guess, *ex post facto*, what that story might be like, hypothesizing from the basis of Malamud's earlier works. So too with Granville Hicks whose review of *The Fixer* in *Saturday Review* makes it clear that this is the kind of novel that Malamud's previous fiction had led us to expect he might write.³

It is interesting then to note that none of the above-mentioned reviews seems able to make much of *The Natural* (1952) which was Malamud's first novel. Hicks' passing reference to this work is not atypical of the treatment accorded it, not merely on this recent occasion, but in much of the critical comment which has appeared since Malamud emerged as an American writer of some importance:

*Although he began his literary career with a novel based on myth, The Natural, and has often introduced elements of fantasy in his short stories, The Fixer is realistic in the most precise sense of that term.*⁴

The position of *The Natural* as an "although" work in the Malamud canon is indeed strange, especially now that we are in a position to see that the real subject of *The Fixer* is a continuation and extension of that begun in *The Natural*.

The key to both works is supplied by the writer himself. Speaking of *The Fixer*, Malamud notes that the book "has a mythological quality. It has to be treated as a myth, an endless story. . . ."⁵ Specifically, Malamud is speaking here of the endless story of injustice, but more to the point of both the first and latest works is the

¹ V. S. Pritchett, "A Pariah," *The New York Review of Books* (September 22, 1966), 8-9.

² George P. Elliott, "Yakov's Ordeal," *The New York Times Book Review* (September 4, 1966), 1, 25-26.

³ Granville Hicks, "One Man to Stand for Six Million," *Saturday Review* (September 10, 1966), 37-39.

⁴ Hicks, p. 37. Even Leslie Fieldler, whose literary tastes and critical stance might lead us to expect that he would understand *The Natural*, fails to see any connection between this work and later ones. See *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York, Revised Edition, 1966), pp. 492-493.

⁵ Interview with Bernard Malamud, *Saturday Review* (September 10, 1966), 39.

clash between myths and objective reality. Myths are "endless stories" for Malamud, and the "endless story" of his novels has been the conflict between myths and the outer world. It is this theme that has occupied Malamud from the outset of his novelistic career, and it has been the task of the heroes of his novels to see beyond myths without at the same time losing sight of them.

In *The Fixer* it is the terrible and agonizing task of Yakov Bok to finally see beyond, outside the myth of Jewishness, of Jewish suffering; his task is to see himself not *only* as a Jew, sustained in his ordeal by his sense of the role of the Jewish people in an alien world, but to see himself as a man, acting in the stream of events that is history. At the end of his interminable incarceration Bok is brought to this insight as he thinks,

*Once you leave you're out in the open; it rains and snows. It snows history, which means what happens to somebody starts in a web of events outside the personal. It starts of course before he gets there. We're all in history, that's sure, but some are more than others, Jews more than some.*⁶

Bok has left the *shtetl* to come to Kiev, and in so doing he has prepared himself to see beyond the myth of Jewishness, to take up the burden of history that falls on all men who become aware of their membership in the human community. But it is important to notice here that in taking up this burden Bok does not give up the myth of Jewishness and Jewish suffering: his final words deal with anti-Semitism; but now he sees the myth in a wider context and because of this he can be a hero in the fullest sense.

Looking at Malamud's novels as a whole it is clear that Bok's realization is the point toward which the author has been steadily moving his fictional heroes. It is the task of these heroes to see and act beyond myths without at the same time destroying the validity of the myths themselves. The stance toward which Malamud moves his heroes from Roy Hobbs to Yakov Bok is that of a man aware of and sustained by a mythology, yet capable, indeed willing, to confront reality in such a fashion as to continually justify and defend the myth on the changing grounds imposed by ever-changing conditions. The only one of Malamud's novels which does not centrally concern itself with this theme is *A New Life*, but even in this failed novel it is apparent that Malamud was originally concerned with the myth-reality conflict. He begins by constructing his familiar situation of a hero immersed in a myth—that of a new life in the virgin land of the American West—and he wishes to demonstrate that this myth may indeed have validity if the hero defends it in a real world filled with unpleasant and agonizing complications. Unfortunately, Malamud allows himself and his hero to become diverted from this central concern into a lengthy and altogether trite consideration of the ins and outs of academia.

It would seem then desirable to go back to *The Natural* to note the writer's early treatment of this clash between myth and reality. In doing so we can more accurately assess Malamud's achievements as a novelist and, at the same time, give this neglected work its due.

⁶ Bernard Malamud, *The Fixer* (New York, 1966), p. 314.

The Natural is a curiosity on two counts: first because it is one of the very few "non-Jewish" works of the author; and second because it makes use of a supposedly unadaptable subject for serious fiction—baseball. It is perhaps this latter factor which has contributed most substantially to the novel's wary critical reception. Baseball has resisted the best efforts of American writers to elevate it to a sufficient height to sustain a serious work, though several writers, notably Ring Lardner, Charles Einstein, and Mark Harris, have correctly seen it as a microcosm of American life. The uniqueness of Malamud's treatment derives from the fact that he has been able to invest this boy's game with tragi-comic qualities as opposed, say, to Lardner or Harris, who treat it in largely comic fashion.

Malamud's successful use of baseball in this novel has been commonly attributed to his use of myth, particularly the myth of the hero, and almost every critic who has troubled himself with *The Natural* has dutifully and sometimes painstakingly pointed out the various mythic parallels.⁷ Malamud, they observe, has equated the baseball hero of his novel with mythic heroes of the past so that the actions of Roy Hobbs, left fielder for the New York Knights, take on a significance far larger than that guaranteed even the most glorious of sweaty demi-gods.

Despite the ease with which critics have exposed the mythic underpinnings of *The Natural* (or perhaps because of it), there has persisted a sense of uneasiness about the book, as if Malamud were somehow cheating by using myths in such a fashion. So Norman Podhoretz:

*All this amounts to a commendable effort to say that baseball is much more important than it seems to be. Using Homer, however, is not only too easy a way to do it, but also a misconception of what intelligence and seriousness of purpose demand from a writer.*⁸

Then too, the mythic parallels themselves seem to lead nowhere, and it has seemed almost as if the use of myth was an end in itself as indeed the critics themselves have made it: to assert the presence of myth in a literary work is not necessarily to explain *why* it is there, and this has unhappily been too often the case with recent criticism; it is as though finding buried traces of myths were but a refinement of the symbol archeology carried on in the journals for the past thirty-five years. Podhoretz and Marcus Klein can tell us what myths are being used where, but they fail to tell us to what effect. Podhoretz can even suggest that baseball has its own mythology:

*Mr. Malamud is truer to the inherent purpose of his book when he finds the elements of myth, not in ancient Greece, but in the real history of baseball.*⁹

Yet he fails to follow up this potentially valuable suggestion as have all other critics who have dealt with *The Natural*. To heed it is to be taken straight to the heart of

⁷ See, for example, Norman Podhoretz, "Achilles in Left Field," *Commentary* (March, 1953), 321-326. See also a fuller treatment by Marcus Klein, *After Alienation* (Cleveland, 1965), pp. 255-263.

⁸ Podhoretz, p. 322.

⁹ Podhoretz, p. 323.

this novel, and perhaps in some measure to the heart of Malamud's fiction as a whole.

All modern heroic myths are but redactions of the ur-myth of the hero as this has been dissected and outlined by Otto Rank, Lord Raglan, and Joseph Campbell. That myth is too well known to require reproduction here, but anyone can see, for example, that the Horatio Alger story is a form of the heroic myth and that, existing as it does in a democratic and predominantly Protestant society, the story has taken on the characteristics of that society while dropping those features of the old heroic myths which are culturally uncongenial: its aristocratic and sexual overtones. Similarly, it can be seen that the myth of the baseball hero is an amalgam of the heroic myth and its democratic offspring, the Horatio Alger story:

- 1) the hero is from undistinguished parentage and has a rural background;
- 2) the hero's father teaches him to play baseball, perhaps thereby fulfilling his own unrealized boyhood ambitions;
- 3) the hero is discovered in his rural haunts by a hardworking scout;
- 4) the hero is transported to the city where he finds life frightening and bewildering; he encounters difficulty in convincing the team "brass" that he has the necessary talent;
- 5) the hero finally gets his chance and displays prodigious talents (fastest fast-ball, longest home run);
- 6) the hero rises to stardom, has a "day" at the stadium and inarticulately expresses his humble thanks;
- 7) everything after the hero's day savors somewhat of anticlimax, his talents gradually decay, and he eventually retires.¹⁰

Roy Hobbs, Malamud's hero, is one who lives and finds his meaning only within this mythology and this is his tragic weakness. He is obsessed with a sense of mission which is nothing less than to fill out the heroic proportions which the pattern casts for those who would follow it. Roy's lack of any values outside the mythology is one of the major sources of the tragicomic quality which Malamud has been able to impart to the novel: Roy's refusal to think in any terms other than those of baseball is, to begin with, comic, and he becomes the prototypical goon athlete immortalized in our literature by Lardner and James Thurber. So this passage in which Harriet Bird sizes Roy up as a future victim of her sexually-tinged desire to murder famous athletes:

Had he ever read Homer?

Try as he would he could only think of four bases and not a book. His head spun at her allusions. He found her lingo strange with all the college stuff and hoped she would stop it because he wanted to talk about baseball.¹¹

¹⁰ Anyone who doubts the existence and persistence of such a myth is invited to note the careers of such baseball heroes as Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Walter Johnson, Joe Di Maggio, Bob Feller, Mickey Mantle, and Willie Mays as these are given to us in anecdote and "official" biographies. See also the baseball novels of John R. Tunis who draws upon this myth in the creation of his heroes.

¹¹ Bernard Malamud, *The Natural* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1964), p. 32. Subsequent page references in the text are to this edition.

And:

"What will you hope to accomplish, Roy?"

He had already told her but after a minute remarked, "Sometimes when I walk down the street I bet people will say there goes Roy Hobbs, the best there ever was in the game."

She gazed at him with touched and troubled eyes. "Is that all?"

He tried to penetrate her question. Twice he had answered it and still she was unsatisfied. He couldn't be sure what she expected him to say. "Is that all?" he repeated. "What more is there?"

"Don't you know?" . . .

"Isn't there something over and above earthly things—some more glorious meaning to one's life and activities?"

"In baseball?" (p. 33)

Fifteen years and worlds of agonies later Roy is still held in the grip of the mythology, still refusing to think or act outside of it. Now, however, Roy's refusal to see outside the myth is not comic, but rather tragic. It is so because we are here witness to the spectacle of a man who has given his life for that myth, and because myth cannot be defended entirely from within; it must be defended by a hero who sees *both* inside and outside it. Still, there is another chance for Roy to save the myth through an acceptance of the love of Iris Lemon. Such an acceptance would prepare him to confront the world of objective reality while at the same time remaining true to baseball's mythology: Iris is in the real world but she still believes in heroes. Here Roy's refusal of Iris' love guarantees his inevitable (Natural) failure. This time when Roy reveals in conversation with a woman (Iris) his tragic limitation it is no longer a laughing matter; his vision has taken on a kind of Oedipal blindness:

"I wanted everything." His voice boomed out of the silence.

She waited.

"I had a lot to give to this game."

"Life?"

"Baseball. If I had started out fifteen years ago like I tried to, I'da been king of them all by now."

"The king of what?"

"The best in the game," he said impatiently.

She sighed deeply. "You're so good now."

"I'da been better. I'da broke most every record there was."

"Does that mean so much to you?"

"Sure," he answered. . . .

"But I don't understand why you should make so much of that. Are your values so—!" (p. 156)

Roy's values are "so—" for this is what distinguishes the hero from ordinary people like Iris. A hero is someone who acts within and for a mythology—national, regional, occupational—even when to do so is to jeopardize his very existence. Malamud's ironic vision is that such an insulated hero cannot possibly win out.

What continually threatens the existence of the hero and of the mythology which he serves is what Wallace Stevens called the "pressure of reality." It is always clear that mythologies are in some ways divorced from the real world, though what they contain may be directives for solving the world's problems. Here the fading, sagging ball park where the Knights play their home games functions as metaphor for the other-worldly quality of mythology in the same fashion as the *shtetl* objectifies the gap between the myth of Jewishness and the outer world in *The Fixer*. Inside the park gates one is transported to another world filled with grotesque devotees, magic bats, and super-sized demigods. The drama of the hero's story comes out of the conflict between the mythology within which the hero acts and the pressures of reality which work always to force the hero into a betrayal of his mythology.

In *The Natural* the pressure of reality is represented by the unholy alliance of Judge Goodwill Banner, the Knights' owner; Gus Sands, the Supreme Bookie; and Memo Paris, Roy's love. The sportswriter, Max Mercy (whose name like that of the Judge has its obvious irony), is their press agent. The Judge has a completely cynical, ruthless attitude toward the game. He is in it to make money and Malamud skilfully contrasts him with his co-owner, Pop Fisher, who manages the team and subscribes wholly to the mythology of the game. Similarly, Gus Sands has no reverence for the game itself. To him it is simply "action" on which to bet. Because of the death of her hero, Bump Baily, Memo Paris has disavowed her belief in the mythology and she now works with the Judge and Gus to destroy the hero.

The hero must meet the challenge to his mythology head-on, and it is one of the central ironies of the novel that Roy Hobbs meets this challenge as he lies bewildered and enfeebled in a hospital bed. The doctor has told Roy that he must quit baseball or risk a heart attack, and Memo, whom Roy covets, has made it clear that she is to be had only for the kind of money which comes to a famous athlete. Thus when Judge Banner appears at the bedside to bribe Roy into throwing the play-off game the hero is at his lowest ebb. Faced with his physical predicament and an uncertain financial future, the hero succumbs. He has at last seen outside the mythology, but in so doing he loses his grip on the mythology itself.

When in the midst of the play-off game Roy attempts to reattach himself to the mythology he cannot do so. Wonderboy, the magic bat, breaks in two, for once this hero has seen and acted outside the mythology—acted, that is, against it—he can never again act with it; his limited vision will not permit him to. Thus the gates of Roy's Eden are closed forever and there remains for him nothing to do but drag himself up the stairs to the Judge's darkened tower to collect his reward.

This final scene is the novel's best, for in it Malamud makes the reader fully aware of the tragedy of Roy's lost herohood. Divorced forever from the mythology which gave his life meaning, Roy can only beat up Gus Sands and the Judge, tear open the envelope containing the bribe money, and shower it over the Judge's head. The end for this failed hero is to enter the real world and to find it a sordid and bitter place:

When he hit the street he was exhausted. He had not shaved, and a black beard gripped his face. He felt old and grimy.

He stared into the faces of people he passed along the street but nobody recognized him.

"He coulda been a king," a woman remarked to a man. (p. 237)

So with modern man: divorced forever from the mythologies of his past, he finds himself alone, on the street, adrift in a new and mythless world.

And yet, of course, this is not the end for the Malamud hero; it is merely the first installment. Roy Hobbs is the hero of a mythology, but ultimately he fails that mythology by his inability to see and act beyond it without destroying it for himself. The mythology of baseball is what keeps the game alive in the hearts of its fans. Without that mythology the game would disintegrate into a jumble of meaningless statistics and facts. Yet conditions change, and the mythology of baseball must be continually defended on new grounds. What this latest baseball hero *should* have done is to accept Iris Lemon's love, and, sustained by this new and vitalizing outside force, resist temptation and expose the Judge and Gus who represent the greed and corruption which now threaten baseball's mythology. In this way the hero would have remained true to his mythology while at the same time defending it against hostile forces. But Roy Hobbs, as we have seen, is too limited a hero to assume this difficult stance; for him it is impossible to act within a mythology and at the same time see beyond it so as to defend it. For him it must be one thing or the other.

In *The Assistant*, however, we find that Malamud has moved his hero, Frank Alpine, one step further toward the stance finally achieved by Yakov Bok. Frank Alpine begins the novel looking at a myth—Jewishness—from the outside, where we left Roy Hobbs:

"What I like to know is what is a Jew anyway?"¹²

By the time of Morris Bober's funeral Frank Alpine can see part way into the mythology which has sustained the grocer in his long ordeal:

Suffering, he thought, is like a piece of goods. I bet the Jews could make a suit of clothes out of it.¹³

At the conclusion of the novel Frank has entered the mythology completely by virtue of his awareness of the truth of Jewishness. A Jew, says the rabbi at Morris Bober's funeral, is one who wants "for others that which he wants also for himself." So Frank Alpine becomes a Jew. He begins outside a mythology and by learning the truth of it from the outside he comes to enter it. It is clear that this is where Yakov Bok's story begins.

¹² Bernard Malamud, *The Assistant* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1959), p. 114.

¹³ Malamud, *The Assistant*, p. 209.