Jews, Blacks and the Cold War at the Top

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That Bernard Malamud passes as a Jewish author is a commentary on the cultural and theological illiteracy of our times. Jewish by descent, his literary themes and values are Christian, echt Christian, sometimes nauseatingly so. "Malamud's themes," Stanley Edgar Hyman informed us long ago in The New Leader, "are the typical themes of the New Testament: charity, compassion, sacrifice, redemption..." He added: "these Christian themes are thoroughly secularized." Malamud's central theme, with variations, is not merely redemption, but redemption through love, through sacrificial, universal, altruistic, agapic, Christian love. His heroes are Christ figures. But the décor of his novels and their characters are largely Jewish. And that's where the confusion begins. As a result, Gentile readers hail him, Jewish readers praise him, he gets prizes and sells books. And even ex-radical literary critics, Philip Rahv and Lionel Trilling—who should know better—acclaim him a master.

It is not merely, as Robert Alter notes, that there has been "a tacit conspiracy afoot in recent years to foist on the American public as peculiarly Jewish various admired characteristics which in fact belong to the common humanity of us all" with the Jewish people depicted as possessing "a kind of monopoly on vividness, compassion, humor, pathos, and the like." No, the contemporary literary-cultural situation is marked more by irony than by conspiracy.

We have the curious cultural spectacle of Bernard Malamud, a teller of Christian tales, "passing" as a Jew. It is unhelpful in this regard to compare him to the painter Marc Chagall as both Rahv and Trilling—who should know better—acclaim him a master. It is unhelpful in this regard to compare him to the painter Marc Chagall as both Rahv and Trilling—who should know better—acclaim him a master. It is unhelpful in this regard to compare him to the painter Marc Chagall as both Rahv and Trilling—who should know better—acclaim him a master.

The influence, then, of traditional Jewish experience "on American writers like Bellow and Malamud is for the most part peculiarly tangential, however..." The painter Rouault played the same role for Catholics like Maritain and for Neo-Thomism that Chagall does in the Neo-Hasidism that descends from Buber. Both are wildly over-praised for extra-painterly reasons.
conspicuous it may sometimes be in their work," writes Alter. Take, for example, Malamud’s novel The Assistant (1957). The Italian clerk, Frank Alpine, while peeling potatoes, asks the Jewish grocer, Morris Bober, about Jewish identity and why Jews suffer so much, and suggests they like to suffer:

“What do you suffer for, Morris?” Frank said.

“I suffer for you,” Morris said calmly.

Frank laid his knife down on the table. His mouth ached. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you suffer for me.”

Whereas in a Mauriac novel this Frank (François) would inevitably wind up on his knees in church, a Malamud novel moves to its promised end: “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.”

A sociologist of literature will see this universalistic fictional Judaism as a consolidation by Jewish literary intellectuals, on the level of what Talcott Parsons calls the cultural system, of a change in the social system: the war and postwar years are a time when grass-roots American Jewry undergoes a massive relocation of itself into suburbia. There, living for the first time as neighbors to Christians denominationally defined, the institution of Conservative Judaism comes into its own, legitimating the survival of the Jewish group as a strictly religious entity. Given American traditions, Conservative Judaism expressed a consensus among various segments of the Jewish community that, in Marshall Sklare’s account, “ethnic solidarity would have to be perpetuated under religious auspices and that consequently a new type of religious institution [Conservative Judaism] was required.”

The postwar success (1945-1970) of this “religious revival” among suburban Jewry is reflected in the invention of a new type of cultural institution: the new postwar fiction of Jewish religiosity. Both “institutions” reflect increased and deepening American-Jewish participation in the modernization process (“assimilation”). Both enact the “rites of modernization” in symbolic form. The new definition of Jewishness as a religious identity, the new postwar re-definition of the descendants of the East European Jewish group as a religious denomination is, Sklare writes, “a highly convenient fiction which it is wise to cultivate.” Malamud and others, in short, construct their fictions on a fiction. This social “fiction” becomes the legendary, metaphorical Jew of the Malamudian Jewish fable. A further development occurs when Malamud relocates this suburban religiosity from the “gilded ghetto” back into the old mise-en-scène of the tenements of first settlement. This enables him to merge in his characters the new universalism of the assimilated suburbs with the “old-time-religion” particularisms of fundamentalist, urban Yiddishkeit.

Authentic and sometimes inauthentic ethnic detail functions in the syntax of his fictional creations the way objets trouvés—like newspaper clippings—function in the pictorial syntax of Cubist collage: they lead what Susanne Langer calls a “virtual” existence in the work of art. These are what Alter calls “the palpably ersatz touches of Jewish local color that have been appearing with increasing frequency in recent novels and stories” and constitute, for him, an element in a phenomenon of the last decade (1955-1965), namely, “that a new sentimental literary myth of the Jew has gained what appears to be general acceptance in American fiction and criticism.”

Why are the mythical literary Jews so generally accepted? For the Jewish community, they seal and celebrate the achievements and redefinitions of the postwar suburban “settlement.” They make good on, and flesh out, on the cultural level, the Gentile expectation that Judaism is a “religion like any other religion,” only more so. For the creators of these fictions themselves, as for their secular ex-radical Jewish appreciators—like Rahv, Trilling, Howe, and others—they solve the re-entry problem: Having left the Jewish community in the ‘30’s for political radicalism, and moved from there to the esthetic, avant-garde radicalism of the ‘40’s and ‘50’s (“virtual revolution”), in the ‘60’s and ‘70’s they signal their homecoming: they celebrate “our country and our subculture.” In the interval, the “idea of the Jew” had been raised by the Gentile culture and historical events (World War II) to unforeseen heights of meaningfulness and pathos: the cultural availability of the idea of Jewishness becomes to secular Jewish intellectuals of the Old Left an irresistible temptation. Out of love, guilt, nostalgia, piety, and fear (for Israel, of the New Left) they find themselves in the uneasy position of trading on, or—to put it crudely—culturally cashing in on, their Jewishness.

The mid-’50’s is as good a date as any to mark this “identity crisis” of the secular Jewish literary intellectual, his move in the direction of particularism. Lionel Trilling, for example, vacillated between two titles (sociologically speaking, two “legitimations”) of his 1950 Wordsworth centenary address at Princeton: “Wordsworth and the Iron Time” and “Wordsworth and the Rabbis.” The latter designation won out when he republished the essay in 1955.5

But why did so many members of the non-Jewish literary-intellectual and religious community join in the general acceptance of Alter’s “new sentimental literary myth of the Jew”? They sentimentalized the Jew, it may be argued, for the same reasons that, during the same period, they romanticized Third World cultures, lionized black culture, patronized youth culture, coveted religious “dialogue,” sought
salvation in the secular city, sanity in the psychotic (R. D. Laing) and, lately--among the ecololatrists--political solutions in the "natural" idea of wilderness. Self-doubt, a self-lacerating, self-disesteeming cultural masochism had undermined confidence, had reinforced their sense of the failure of a culture.

Given such a "failure of nerve," redemptive "words" spoken out by "others" conventionally defined as "out-groups" and "marginal groups"--the other America, the other culture, the other world--alone qualified for a hearing as authentic, sincere, and "relevant." Only a heteronomous "word" could be salvific. "A sentimental literary myth," observes Robert Alter in his essay "Sentimentalizing the Jews," "usually represents the failure of a culture to come to terms with some vital aspect of its own life; most often," he continues, "the culture responds to its own inadequacy by projecting its secret fears, its unadmitted desires or illusory fantasies of itself onto a patently unreal image of a figure from another culture. . . . Such myths are sentimental because they are not responses to any observable realities," he concludes, "but rather sets of contrivances--stock situations, characters, and images--intended to produce certain desired emotions or predetermined states of imagination."*6

The importance of Robert Alter's essays on "Modern Jewish Writing" derives from the fact that in a subdued and scholarly way he is engaged in what can only be called a cultural enterprise of grand larceny. With malice aforethought, secure in his knowledge of what the Jewish tradition actually is, and of who the "modernizers" are, and of just what, culturally, they are up to when they come on as the indigenous "outsider," and equally secure in his knowledge of the American religio-cultural disarray, its pathetic tropism towards the "outsider"--"our turning to the supposed aliens in our midst for an alternative to the true American"--he loots us of our last, our archetypal "outsider-as-insider," the modern American-Jewish writer. This contemporary culture-hero, he informs us, is only residually or vestigially Jewish, if Jewish at all. Often, in fact, he is very American, very Christian, one of "our crowd." This is disturbing intelligence; a form of cultural subversion. But the charge is well-documented.

Leslie Fiedler's Baro Finklestone, for example, the hero of his novel Back to China, illustrates perfectly the sentimental myth, satisfies completely the Gentile fantasy of the mysterious outsider, the stranger as moral preceptor. Alter observes that like all Jews who are allowed to be the protagonists of novels, Finklestone is an inveterate schleimiel, but in his ineffectuality and muddle-headedness, he is also--Fiedler must insist--morally sensitive in a way that others are not. He is not just a well-meaning, perennially protesting liberal; he really cares about other human beings, he carries the world's guilt on his shoulders, and he is driven to a sort of self-immolation in an attempt to expiate that guilt. This last touch, incidentally, introduces the by-now-familiar motif of the Jew as Christ, which itself is a good indication of the degree to which the fantasy-image of the Jew in American fiction is American and Christian in its deepest imaginings.

This cultural reversal results in "a kind of double sentimental myth: the Jew emerges from this fiction as an imaginary creature embodying both what Americans would like to think about Jews and what American Jewish intellectuals would like to think about themselves" (my italics). The staying power of what Alter calls this "pious self-delusion," the double sentimental literary myth, despite the efforts of critics like Hyman and Alter, and in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary, is truly remarkable. As the literary-intellectual counterpart of the general cultural "myth of the Judeo-Christian tradition," vested interests (cultural and other) from both the Christian and Jewish communities "conspire" to keep the thing afloat. There is also always the understandable fear on the part of literary ecumenists that should the "positive" myth of Nathan the Wise and Daniel Deronda, and their contemporary literary descendants, be unmasked, the "negative" myth of Shylock and Fagin, and their contemporary literary descendants, might return in force and stage a kind of literary take-over. Nevertheless, myths are myths, whether products of negative or positive thinking.

All these considerations come to mind when we reflect on Malamud's most recent novel, The Tenants. Why the vogue of Malamud's stories, rather than those incomparably better stories of Meyer Liben, for example? Liben's characters are precisely observed; they resist, with the stubbornness of stones, being blown up into Malamudian emblems. They are thus culturally unavailable; obviously, this is "minor fiction." Why the vogue of I. B. Singer over his brother I. J. Singer? Because it is the former who works the vein of religious piety that meets the exigencies of the sentimental myth. (The traditional sanctions against social assimilation, one finds, are conspicuously absent in the case of successful literary assimilation.*) Why is the accuracy of Isaac Rosenfeld's hauntingly and beautifully observed Passage From Home neglected in favor of Saul Bellow's fictions? Because, unlike Bellow's Augie, his Henderson, Herzog and Sammler, Rosenfeld's Bernard resists the cultural lure of representativeness, of cultural assimilation; he refuses to become a metaphor of the sentimental myth.*

* Asa Leventhal of Bellow's The Victim and Tommy Wilhelm of Seize the Day put up considerable resistance to this metaphorical manipulation. Yet, in the end, they too are inflated into mythical "significance." They succumb to "literature."
In Malamud's *The Tenants,* his "mythical" Jew is a novelist named Harry Lesser. Lesser occupies the top of a condemned East 31st Street tenement with a "mythical" black writer named Willie Spearmint, both subjected to the harassments of a "mythical" landlord named Irving Levenspiel who wants them out so that he can tear down the building and set up a modern six-storey apartment house. Lesser is trying to finish a novel he has worked at for ten years; Spearmint, trying to type raw black rage onto paper, is partly preoccupied with his mistress, Irene Bell. Willie, a sub-literary Black Panther-type, brutally rejects all Lesser's advances. Lesser, we know from the outset, will end classically: "the victim" of hubris and compassion—Hubris on each other. So between the black and Jewish literary-critical intelligentsia, there is, on the one hand, a cultural status war on the level of the cultural system—"spiritual" war on the level of the cultural system—"kulturkampf"—waged in terms of cultural status politics. The hot war in the streets is a struggle over real interests: scarce jobs, eligibility criteria, the merit system, community control of schools and, more recently, the "dual" then "open" admissions policies for the City University. The other war, the one between black and Jewish intellectuals, is a struggle over symbolic interests; it is a cultural status war of several dimensions, a conflict equally savage—in its own terms—as the war going on "down below." (That Malamud chose the top storey of an old tenement as his scene for the cultural clash between black and Jewish literary intellectuals demonstrates his gift for inspired metaphor.)

The two struggles, social and cultural, are quite distinct, but occasionally—as when Norman Mailer ran in the New York mayoral primaries in 1969—they overlap. Towards the end of the campaign, Mailer and his running-mate Jimmy Breslin endorsed a "dual admissions" program for CCNY. A Jewish literary intellectual had thus taken the "wrong" side in the hot war in the streets. Grass-roots voters in the Jewish community were up in arms. Taking the candidates' traditional walk through the lower East Side, the Mailer entourage ate its fill at Ratner's dairy restaurant. "But despite the prodigious eating and the presence of Mailer's mother, who speaks Yiddish," his campaign manager recalls, "we were subtly damned with goyische civility instead of being blessed with Jewish love. Eighty per cent of the questions had to do with our stand on CCNY."

The two struggles can overlap in other ways. If Mailer descended into the hot war of the streets, Midge Decter (in a recent *New York* magazine article "Is It Still O.K. to Hate Albert Shanker?") passes Mailer going in the other direction. She takes "hot war" members of the U.F.T. and their leader off the street and elevates them to the level of the cultural intelligentsia at the top. These teachers do not really answer to the regnant image of the public school teacher, she maintains. She reconceptualizes them, in the interests of greater accuracy, as products of the Depression, as "aspiring members of the intelligentsia in the thirties" who, moved by the need for security, ended up in a profession a good deal beneath them.

If the U.F.T. membership is a kind of intelligentsia *manqué,* their leader, Albert Shanker, is a full-blown intellectual. At some critical juncture in his life, for complex reasons, he turned "from the life and calling of a full-blown intellectual. In the very early 1950's," Miss Decter writes, "he had been a graduate student of philosophy at Columbia, his particular field of interest being early Pragmatism." The fields of the later Pragmatism having become unmanageably alluring, Mr. Shanker apparently shifted his energies from philosophy to more palpable commitments. Kidding aside, we do see here, I believe, an attempt to carry Mr. Shanker and his U.F.T. membership upwards, making them *ex-officio* participants in the debates of the cultural intellectuals at the top rather than mere bread-and-butter warriors fighting an insurgent black subculture in a decentralization battle.

Most of the time, however, the "high road" of the *kulturkampf* doesn't intersect with the "low road" of the hot war in the streets. Herbert Gans has applied a sociological "succession model" to explain the interest-war in the streets: insurgent blacks, ill-equipped rural immigrants from the South, struggle to start up the occupational ladder. The collision with earlier immigrant groups is largely a socio-economic collision, despite the inter-ethnic and interracial slurs that are hurled.18

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* The policy proposed that in 1970 half of CCNY's freshman class be recruited from eleven black and Puerto Rican areas (in Harlem and the Bronx) while the other half would be chosen according to traditional academic criteria. This meant that a number of academically qualified Jewish students would be refused admittance. Lindsay and the other mayoral candidates denounced the plan as a "quota" system, "a word"—says Joe Flaherty in *Managing Mailer*—"with dark roots in Jewish history."
The cold war at the top, between the literary-cultural representatives of the contending groups, is a war for status: the status at issue is the culturally prestigious one of “victim.” Prior to the Supreme Court desegregation decision of 1954 and the civil rights movement of the 1950’s and ’60’s, it was the Jews who, by universal consent and especially since the Holocaust, had prescriptive and clear title to the victim-status. The prominence of the black, with his own bitter history, his own outrage and importance, has now clouded the Jewish title. The unacknowledged status-conflict “at the top” between Jewish and black intellectuals is a struggle over which victim is the “real” victim, over who is “really,” primogeniturally, entitled to the two subcultures. Genocide, “the most terrible word to James Baldwin,” the evidence is overwhelming.

... rampaging children in a pillow fight.” Katz is at pains to let him get away with it. “Everybody,” he writes, “tries to jump on each other’s bandwagon without regard to fact, to meaning, to consequences, like rampaging children in a pillow fight.” Katz is at pains to translate his difference with Baldwin into factual differences: he insists on fidelity to historical fact and historical differences, on the literal versus the metaphorical meanings of words. But his language betrays him; the thrust of the struggle is clearly over status and values, not facts. When he tells Baldwin that Genocide has happened, once and for all, in the literal sense, and not in the rhetorical misuse of it “by fly-by-night self-styled revolutionaries,” it is the phrase “fly-by-night” that gives him away: he is addressing, clearly, cultural upstarts. Listen to the conclusion of Katz’s J’accuse: “You try to take the thorny crown of martyrdom from the Jewish housewife in the boxcar headed for Dachau! And attempt to place it on the head of Angela Davis. But this crown of martyrdom can only be earned in one way—the way of the chimneys of Dachau. On Miss Davis it doesn’t fit.”

Katz, in the language of crowns and legitimacy, is addressing the cultural representative of a group engaged in what he considers to be cultural usurpation. What may be socio-economic “turf” in Brooklyn is, manifestly, cultural “turf” in New York. Eligibility criteria for advancing up the occupational-status ladder are here spelled out with finality for entry into the highest topdog status in the cultural value system: access to this title “can only be earned in one way,” Baldwin is informed. Pretenders to this crown will be exposed as such. The “crown” is further described in such a way as to disclose the latent theological dimension of this prized and contested status: the crown that can never, presumably, fit Miss Davis but does fit the Jewish housewife headed for Dachau is a “thorny crown.” The status struggle between Katz and Baldwin as representatives of two subcultures takes place, in the last analysis, within a Christian “definition of the situation.”

It is an exchange played out before a Gentile status-audience, for a symbolic cultural good—a crown of thorns—first worn by that Supreme Victim from whom our civilization takes its name. He it was who first established, for all time, that “reversal” of the Eros of Antiquity whereby the lowly and ignominious and inconspicuous became the icon for the highest. “Reverence for inconspicuousness is the final key,” writes Ernst Bloch, the German Jewish Marxist, “to this reversal of the motion of love. . . . This love has no parallel, therefore, in any previous moral faith, not even in the Jewish one, despite the ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself’ (Lev. 19, 18) that was received in Matthew 22, 39. Buddha leaps into the fire as a rabbit, to give a beggar a meal, but his love does not lead to the beggar, does not seek divinity in impotence.” Jesus Christ, Supreme Victim, Superstar; the first of the beautiful losers.

This fact of our culture has important sociological consequences. If the direction of social mobility on the level of our social system is upwards, defined by an increasing effort of access to power, money, and prestige, status-work on the highest levels of our cultural value system may be viewed as a form of downward mobility, a grim praxis designed to establish our group credentials as more lowly than those of our rivals, entitling us to the top underdog status of undisputed and indisputable victim. The cultural credit-rating system, in other words, works on the principle of impecuniousness. It helps, even if we are not ourselves victims, if we can “claim relationship with” accredited victims. This can lead to comedies of intellectual manners. It can also lead to moving works of art (read, for example, the late Sylvia Plath’s poem “Daddy”).

John Galtung is a pioneer in spelling out the syntax of upward or social mobility. All of us, he maintains, occupy status sets of many, often discrepant, statuses, some of them defined as Topdog (or ’T) statuses and some of them defined as Underdog (or
Jewish intellectuals, however, do not see themselves as black intellectuals and their allies see them—as powerful goyim, part of the “establishment,” secure in the exercise of political and economic clout. They see themselves not as prisoners of some anachronistic self-image but as beset by a not wholly unfounded and non-paranoid anxiety that they may one day be “victims” again (even paranoids have real enemies, Delmore Schwartz used to say). There is the well-founded fear of violence in the hot war in the streets, the fear of enforced socio-economic retrenchment, of the demographic “take-over” of “their” city. But these real fears are confused with and reflect the “secret” fear of cultural status-loss, the fear of what, in another connection, Daniel Bell called “cultural dispossess- on.” Only a status explanation, crossed with generational theory, can explain the complex phenomenon of “The Jewish Dispossessed” and the move to the right of the Jewish intelligentsia in the 1960’s. A second “expanded and updated” version of Bell’s The Radical Right is long overdue.18

Malamud’s The Tenants, like Saul Bellow’s Mr. Sammler’s Planet before it, re-enacts many of these issues in the “symbolic action” of the novel. Among reviewers of The Tenants, only Anatole Broyard in the New York Times detects the two dimensions of the black-Jewish collision: One dimension is the old “liberal” role of the 1940’s-1950’s, the Jews sponsoring, in a “Christ-like” way, the blacks’ economic and political interests; and the other, the very different dimension of rivalry at the top, on the cultural level, for the stellar role—which I define as that of the cultural pathos of the Victim—which emerged in the 1960’s. Willie Spearmint is culturally aggressive, Broyard notes, and “wants to stop understudying the Jew and take over the star’s role in the drama of American society. In spite of all this, Lesser turns the other cheek.” When the landlord, Levenspiel, smashers Willie’s table and chair, Lesser, “like a liberal foundation giving a grant despite the hostility of the recipient, buys Willie new furniture. He suggests, at the same time, that Willie move down to a lower floor to avoid discovery. He himself lives on the top floor and we feel,” the reviewer carefully notes, “that his real reason may well be his conviction that Willie’s struggle is on a lower level than his own and should remain there. But,” he concludes, “Willie stays. He has been in the basement too long; he wants the view from the top...”

Contemporary themes appear, but there are also themes from the 1930’s to the 1950’s. Wouk’s Majorie Morningstar reappears, almost in amber, out of the ’50’s. In a sub-plot, Willie’s meshuggeneh mistress, Irene Bell (née Belinsky), is reclaimed from “self-hate,” dyed blond hair, and the arms of Willie (Noel Airman): Lesser “was sure her discontent was with herself.” “Shalom,” he says to her in the street. She looks at him oddly, coldly. ‘Why do you say

U) statuses. Take, for example, a black medical doctor and a white policeman in the South. As black, the doctor is defined as occupying an Underdog status; as white, the policeman is Topdog. But as a professional, the black doctor holds higher rank than the policeman. When these two interact—the black M.D. with his doctor’s kit, for example, asking the white policeman in Brookhaven, Mississippi, if he can double-park while he makes a sick call—it is not at all unlikely that each will strive to define the interaction in terms of his Topdog status, forcing the other to define it in terms of his Underdog status. This would exemplify Galtung’s “Axiom of Rank Equilibration,” wherein each strives to “equilibrate their status sets upwards, and only sets with equal ranks are stationary.”

We have no known authority to equal Galtung on the considerably more complex syntax governing the dynamics of the high enterprise of the deliberately downward cultural mobility we might call “underdogism.” The highest norms of the expressive component of the culture, what I call the Protestant Esthetic, legitimate only that form of expressive humility we call “good taste.” The taboo on emotional incontinence and ostentation still holds in the highest quarters. The mix of these two status systems, the one for the “real,” the other for the cultural world, makes for considerable moral ambiguity. Success must be disguised, money—especially when it accumulates and gets old—must turn itself into taste and purchase art, or else, forsaking even this vulgarity, must retreat, covering its face with shame in the dark vaults of Morgan Guaranty Trust. Norman Podhoretz’s Making It is a refreshing exploration of this form of double-entry moral bookkeeping.

It is just here that we may socially locate the post-war cultural erosion in the plausibility of the claim of the Jewish group to the charisma of a continuing victim-status. The Jews, as a group, have “made it.” “When one compares the Jew of Westchester and Nassau Counties with the Negro of Harlem,” Rabbi Eugene Borowitz observes, “his concern with the problems of a Vatican Council and textbook writers seems to be utterly luftmenshish. . . . [W]e are rich,” he adds, “and reasonably well accepted.” A cultural “credibility gap” has opened up due to the discrepancy between Jewish self-appraisal, and how Jews look to others, especially to the insurgent black subculture. It is the black man, Rabbi Alan Miller writes, “who, on the American scene, has been the persecuted. He is, in truth, the American Jew.”

Diaspora, and, for that matter, Israeli Jewry, by repeating the lachrymose rhetoric of the earlier immigrant generations, is acknowledging that our civilization awards its highest cultural prestige to victims. But it is also exposing itself to the charge of a black intellectual, Harold Cruse, that “having gained the cake . . . they would like to pretend that it is yesterday’s bagels.”
Another theme of the traditional American-Jewish novel reappears with reverse English: the WASP as mentor of the morals but especially the manners (linguistic and otherwise) of the Jew—Hyman Kaplan’s Mr. Parkhill, Augie’s Mrs. Renling, Podhoretz’s “Mrs. K”—is now replaced by Lesser, who functions as caretaker of the morals, manners, and the novel of the black apprentice. As once WASP to Jew, so, now, Jew to black. As always, it is a thankless role.

Lionel Trilling’s short story, “The Other Margaret,” reappears out of the ‘40s in a new version. The black maid, the “other” Margaret, smashes the young white Margaret’s “made present” for her mother’s birthday: a pottery lamb. In The Tenants, Willie burns Lesser’s manuscripts. Moral and political issues of high import are played out in terms of the sacred and significant forms of art. Rename this fable: “The Other Writer.”

Malamud’s tale also reproduces and updates in a curious way the literary class war of the ‘30s, when Partisan Review was born out of a struggle against the proletarian-social realism novel of Mike Gold’s New Masses. The Marxian matrix has of course vanished; Lesser struggles today to submit Willie’s sub-literary black id to the disciplines of the art-novel (read: the superego). Trilling’s reworking of this theme in the mid-‘40s, pitting the Jamesian art-novel against the cruder, and therefore presumably more “authentic,” naturalistic-confessional novel of Dreiser and “progressive liberalism,” becomes, in retrospect, a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy of the core metaphor that will serve as the impersonation of a plot in Malamud’s fable, The Tenants, in 1971: “Dreiser and James,” Trilling writes: “with that juxtaposition we are immediately at the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet.”21 “One winter’s night,” Malamud writes of Willie and Lesser, nature and fine art, “they meet on the frigid stairs.”

Another theme, this one from the 1950’s, reappears in The Tenants, but in ironically reversed form. In a now notorious essay in the Autumn, 1963, issue of Dissent, “Black Boys and Native Sons,” editor Irving Howe took it upon himself to scold Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin for deviating from the militantly black naturalistic “protest” novel of Richard Wright. His final point, as summarized by Professor Daniel Aaron, was that the black writer, if he is to “assert his humanity,” must write “in protest and rage, even though he may have to discard the ‘suave’ and ‘the elegant’” (presumably derived from his white peers) for the “harsh, clumsy, heavy-breathing” prose that is the appropriate vehicle for “the part of suppressed bitterness.” Ralph Ellison replied in anger. “By the same logic,” Aaron continues, summarizing this chapter in the black-Jewish literary intellectual status-war, “the Jew was somehow betraying himself and Jewry in the act of transcending his Jewishness. Ellison insisted that he was not denying his race by designating Eliot, Malraux, Dostoevsky, and Faulkner as his literary ancestors rather than Richard Wright. The irony of a white critic telling a Negro writer what he must do to be saved, both as a man and as a writer,” Aaron concludes, “is not lost on any reader of the Howe-Ellison exchange.”20

James Baldwin got off rather more easily than Ellison because, as Howe detected from the non-literary sound of the Baldwinian voice in Another Country, Baldwin, at least, gave every promise of being no longer held back by the proprieties of literature. But, Ellison, detecting noblesse oblige in Howe’s “call to order,” and perhaps sensing that he was being conscripted into Howe’s esoteric vendetta against Trilling and the “Columbia liberalism” of the ‘50s, refused to write of his own wounds, and continued as he was.21

It is a subcultural irony that we should find Malamud’s Lesser endeavoring to instruct Willie in the exigencies of “new critical” form, reversing the lessons black writers have so recently been hearing from critic Irving Howe. “If we are talking about art,” he tells him, “form demands its rights.” “Art can kiss my juicy ass . . .,” is the reply. “I am art. Willie Spearmint, black man. My form is myself.” No, Lesser tells him, repelled by Willie’s “funky manuscript” and the “mainly naturalistic confessional” form Willie seeks as the style “connatural” with his black protest. “You can’t turn black experience into literature just by writing it down,” Lesser insists in this running argument at the top of the tenement. “If you’re an artist,” he explains, reaching for the ultimate contrast, “you can’t be a nigger, Willie.”

The conflict over the nature of the novel and the importance of fictional form becomes, in the end, the chosen “vehicle” in Malamud’s Tenants for playing out the literary-cultural status-war between black
and Jewish intellectual. Black experience is eligible for registration in cultural terms only if it assumes proper fictional form. Lesser and his colleagues are the self-appointed custodians of these rubrical and civilized matters. "I am an expert of writing," Lesser explains. And Willie replies: "I hate all that shit when whites tell you about black." Willie is depicted by Malamud as experiencing these lofty instructions in the mysteries of form as an obscure attempt to emasculate him and his experience. "Lesser," he says, "you tryin to fuck up my mind and confuse me. I read all about that formalism jazz in the library and its bullshit. You tryin to kill off my natural writin by pretending you are interested in the fuckin form of it ..."

Lesser, in this, never once levels with Willie. He never once identifies with his "pupil." He speaks from on high. It is a sign of Lesser's "underdeveloped heart"—as one used to say in the '50s—as well as a failure of Malamud's imagination, that he never chooses to let Willie in on the secret that the Jewish writer—"Lesser," Malamud, Bellow and others (and, for that matter, all the immigrant ethnics out of steerage)—has had to struggle with the very same ethnicallyemasculating exigencies of "fucking WASP form" that Willie does, on both the levels of social behavior and cultural performance. From Lesser's lofty instructions in the "rites of passage" to which he must submit his black experience if he is to enter the chosen precincts of the WASP novel, Willie would never gather that "soul" shares a common predicament in this respect with Yiddishkeit. The resources of intimacy possible to shared subcultural "secrets" lie unused in Malamud's Tenants.

Milton Himmelfarb, writing about "Jewish Class Conflict?" in Commentary, does suspend subcultural reticence by telling us of "a powerful and still operative Jewish tradition that most are probably not even aware is Jewish. That is the tradition of being attracted by the edel (cultivated) Gentile and repelled by the prost (common) one." Well and good. And Willie is prost indeed. What Himmelfarb does not tell us—any more than Malamud's persona, Lesser, tells Willie—is of a latent and highly ambivalent component in this very attraction to the edel, to cultivated and even austerer form: this is the other, especially East European Jewish tradition, of knowing full well the ethnic price-tag involved in submitting to the "elegant" allure of Western form and its attendant modernist sensibility.

For instruction in this Jewish predicament, analogous to that of the black writer, let us turn for a moment from Malamud to Saul Bellow. Unlike Malamud's fictional Lesser, Bellow knew the cost involved in the sacrifice to form. He, for one, as an apprentice novelist, was hardly unambiguously delighted by his realization that every time he plugged his Yiddishkeit into the genre of the modernist "art" novel it came out Edelkeit.

The modernist idea of the novel, bequeathed to Saul Bellow in the early '40s by Hemingway, was of a genre so fine no Jew could violate it. "Do you have feelings?" asks Bellow on the opening page of his first novel, Dangling Man. Then "there are correct and incorrect ways of indicating them," he replies, mocking the received code of novelistic propriety. Indeed, to indicate feelings without expressing them is the correct way of expressing them. Personal feelings are to be encoded in forms that do not mimetically "express" them. "Do you have an inner life?" he continues. "It is nobody's business but your own. Do you have emotions? Strangle them."

With Dangling Man, purporting to be the journal of a young Chicagoan idling his time for six months as he awaits induction into the Army, Bellow struggles to defy the received conventions of the well-made novel. The "shame" Joseph admits to in his opening entry, his embarrassment at recording his "inward transactions," represents Bellow's own ambivalence about offering this candid record of introspection as a novel. Such a novel is sure to be considered "a kind of self-indulgence, a weakness, and in poor taste." It will offend against that American inheritance "from the English gentleman—that curious mixture of striving, asceticism, and rigor .... This code admits of a limited candor, to be sure, "a closemouthed straightforwardness. But in the truest candor, it has an inhibitory effect. Most serious matters are closed to the hard-boiled. They are unpracticed in introspection ... If you have difficulties, grapple with them silently, goes one of their commandments. To hell with that!" he concludes. "I intend to talk about mine."

Bellow is here struggling with that Protestant esthetic, and with the ways this WASP value-complex has institutionalized itself in high culture, shaping the ethos, sensibility and taste at work in the canons of the modernist novel. Dangling Man, anchored in the milieu of East European Jewry, is offered as being in an adversary relationship to this code. Bellow is engaged, in his own 'bold self-conception, in nothing less than an enterprise of cultural subversion. It is as though the revolutionary animus of his ex-radical hero, Joseph, relinquishing the dream of overturning the societal world, had transposed its energies to the level of culture and was now engaged in toppling the tight little world of the novel, colonizing it with characters who could be expected to violate the norms of its decorum. (This transposition of political and societal concerns into the "key" of culture occurs as the Depression '30's pass into the war and postwar years, the "cultural" '40's and '50's.)

Clearly, the sons of East European Jewry have had a hard time pouring their subculture of Yiddish-

*T. S. Eliot on Henry James: "He had a mind so fine no idea could violate it."
keit into Western Protestant culture patterns. What Robert Cohn becomes in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* is not a function, primarily, of the author’s anti-Semitism. It is the value exigencies immanent in the craft and genre of the modernist novel itself and its attendant sensibility that make Cohn “look bad.” Bellow’s career as a novelist, basing itself on the central insight that East European Jewry is not *Romansfachig*—not “fit” for the modernist novel—was, from the outset, impaled on the horns of a dilemma: it could either remain within the conventions of the modernist novel—and thus be forced to do a cultural “nose job” on its Jewish characters, “assimilating” them—or break out of the WASP modernist novel, re-vert, for example, to the picaresque form with its looser “admissions” criteria. Like all cultural dilemmas, this one is brutal.

Bellow has spent a lifetime trying to surmount it. Despite his bold intentions, mentioned above, *Dangling Man* and, later, *The Victim*, turned out to be conspicuously well-made and discreet. Even, later, the will at work in what Frank Kermode calls the “détente” of *Augie March*, was unable to do the work of the imagination, and Bellow was forced to rethread to the compromise of *Herzog*. For Bellow, “letting go” would always involve “going back” to the earlier, given stratum of the culture of the shtetl.

In *Herzog*, European Jewish material returns to center stage in the form of a *luftmenschy* autodidact professor, vulnerable, harassed, importunate, enduring the messiness of a nervous breakdown. Nevertheless, all this “rawness” is very well cooked, and one is not surprised to find Jean Stafford in the pages of *Vogue* magazine “congratulating” *Herzog* on “the good taste in which he has conducted his crack-up...” and declaring the novel “a work of elegance” about a “fastidious Man.” What has become, one asks, of the manifesto that opens *Dangling Man*, with its brave declaration of independence for East European Jewish expressiveness, with its implied insistence that the subculture of *Yiddishkeit* assert its rights to expressive elbowroom in the hitherto fastidious confines of the modernist novel? If we listen to the tale, and not the teller, to Bellow’s accomplished and not to his avowed intention, we will realize that he has “sold out” to the good-taste canon of Western modernism. His avowed intention, wrote Theodore Ross in the *Chicago Jewish Forum*, “to open doors on ways of feeling and living which differ from those of the tight-lipped Anglo-Saxon gentleman and his carefully preened code of values,” and the proposal of “this contra-Hemingway writer” for accomplishing this, that is, to tap the creative strength “which inhere in the style and society of the urban Jew...”, this avowed intention has been abandoned. As it turns out, in the words of Wallace Markfield, Bellow “doesn’t write Jewish novels, but rather a highly intellectualized Jewish book. When he chooses to write about Jews he is very careful to stay away from bagels and lox and Ocean Parkway.” The current conflict in black novelists between “black feeling” and “white form” re-enacts the conflict in Bellow between two sets of cultural values: the subculture of *Yiddishkeit* of his early socialization and the taste canons of the Western modernized culture he encountered later.

Deciding to write *Dangling Man* in the form of a journal was the initial collision in Bellow of these two value-patterns. Despite the high Western Christian value placed on the individual, there is the equally strong prohibition on pride, vanity, and self-love. In practice, this cultural contradiction is handled by the expressive code of the culture which embodies the norm directing how personality is to be expressed. Talking about oneself in a diary is perfectly acceptable (the Puritan divines, after all, kept journals as a religious duty). But one must not indulge the perpendicular pronoun too much. All of decorum is reducible to a matter of adverbs. As Bellow writes: “If you have difficulties, grapple with them silently, goes one of their commandments” (emphasis mine). Silently, as opposed to too loudly, ostentatiously, sentimentally, complainingly, self-pityingly. The “commandments” of the *goyim* are a halakah of adverbs. Bellow is right that this code is not a code limited to literary decorum but pervades the entire culture. “To a degree,” he notes, “everyone obeys this code.” Thus, where T. S. Eliot writes that the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual “extinction of personality,” Emily Post writes equivalently that progress in good behavior is marked by unconsciousness of self, which she defines as the ability to “extinguish all thought of oneself...” (emphasis mine).

In the face of these prescriptions for extinction emanating from the canonical cultural authorities on literary and social behavior, it is no wonder that Bellow pleads the “state of moralization” of his protagonist, Joseph, as making it “necessary” for him to keep a journal, that is, to talk to and about himself. (Analogously, *Herzog* opens with the words: “If I am out of my mind, it’s all right with me.”) Only the “sick role” can lift the curse of sentimentality off so much chutzpahdik self-regard. The exigencies of subject matter are pressed into service to legitimize a violation of form. “I do not feel guilty of self-indulgence in the least,” Joseph protests (slightly too much). What, indeed, one might ask, is so horrible in what Henry James calls “the terrible fluidity of self-revelation”?

What exactly is at stake on the opening page of *Dangling Man* where, as Marcus Klein has noted, Bellow is pitting the Yiddish shtetl tradition of the “exercise of personality for its own sake” against the values of “American asceticism,” which forbid
"the exhibition of personality..."? The Protestant ethic—impersonal service of an impersonal end—passes imperceptibly into the Protestant esthetic of restraint and self-effacement. As self-importance and vanity violate the Protestant ethic, exhibitionism and ostentation are the core lapses in the Protestant esthetic. The fierce puritanism of "high" good taste, writes Justin Kaplan in a Times review, would see to it "that hardly any experience is recounted for its own sake"; Bellow's "exercise of personality for its own sake" commits the sin of ostentation. Deeply ambivalent over the nature of vulgarity, Bellow hedges, backing and filling. Thus, he initially conceives his portraitist heroes as singing themselves with what Klein terms "nervy insolence" in a manner fully sanctioned by Yiddish subculture. Then, re-conceiving them in terms of the exigencies of the novel—dialogue, development, sensitivity, selflessness—he cuts their chutzpah to civilize them. They must be turned out as Reform Jews or Markfield's "highly intellectualized Jews" or Jews whose values are "co-mingled with the 'superior' values of Art and Sensitivity" (Theodore Roos).

This same revisionism of initial Yiddish impulse by subsequent WASP censorship may be observed at work in Bellow himself as a kind of self-censorship. His initial Paris Review (Winter, 1966) interview with Gordon Harper took only about an hour and a half, taped in two sessions. But Bellow, reports Harper, devoted "over five weeks" in a series of meetings—"up to two hours a day, at least twice and often three times a week throughout the entire five-week period"—to "the most careful revision" of the original tapes. The typescript of each of the two sessions was carefully worked over by Bellow with pen and ink, "taking as many as three separate meetings to do a complete revision. Then another typescript was made, and the process started over." Harper lists six types of changes made by Bellow: slight changes in meaning, language "tightened up," style improved, excursions deleted, colloquial substituted for literary diction and, finally, the "prunings." These latter cultivations eliminated those few places in which Bellow, Harper writes, "came to feel he was 'exhibiting' himself, and these were scratched out."

The better Jewish novelists, like Bellow and Malamud, have not put their black characters through any such "pruning" process. No one is asking that black Daniel Derondas start walking around in the novels of Jewish writers. But surely the black pickpocket of Bellow's Mr. Sammler's Planet, who pulls out and exhibits his penis in the West Side lobby, is not exactly representative. Nor is the black writer that Malamud transforms him into, taking him out of Bellow's lobby, and putting him up a few flights, either a representative or a carefully observed actual character. Willie could have had the benefit of a little "pruning" and, who knows, he might have begun to look like, say, Ralph Ellison.

Jewish non-literary intellectuals are no more generous. Theodore Draper, for example, in The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism, offers us a residual definition of the Black Nationalist movement: it is not an authentic nationalist movement (as, presumably, Zionism was). Draper sounds like nothing so much as a Reform Jewish spokesman lecturing the "down-town ostjuden of the 30's on the utter fantasticality of their utopian nationalist aspirations. Ben Halpern, too, in Jews and Blacks, defines the black minority residually, and invidiously, spelling out for us in bleeding detail that they are not and, apparently, never can be, an "ideological minority" like the Jewish subculture. They are only a "social minority," "no more than a mythic sub-culture" which aspires, like any upstart, to a higher and culturally more meaningful status.24

Subcultures tend to define each other residually. This problem for the theorist and novelist is a special case of a general social theory problem. "If, as is almost always the case," Talcott Parsons writes, "not all the actually observable facts of the field, or those which have been observed, fit into the sharply, positively defined categories, they tend to be given one or more blanket names which refer to categories negatively defined, that is, of facts known to exist, which are even more or less adequately described, but are defined theoretically by their failure to fit into the positively defined categories of the system. The only theoretically significant—or, we should add, imaginatively significant—statements about these facts are negative statements—they are not so and so."25 If a symptom of impending theoretical and imaginative change consists, as Parsons adds, "in the carving out from residual categories of definite, positively defined concepts and their verification in empirical investigation"—in the imagination, we would add—Malamud's The Tenants gives us no grounds for optimism that impending progress in the relations of our two classic minorities is in the offing. On the contrary, Malamud, as between Willie and Lesser, tries, perhaps, to be even-handed. But he isn't.

Willie is a residual category, ill-observed and with no insides. The will—even good will—cannot do the work of the imagination. Even in the very last line, as they hack each other to death—"Each, thought the writer, feels the anguish of the other"—the Jewish writer tops the black. Each feels, but Lesser both feels and thinks; Willie only feels. Even as they die, Lesser is more.

2. I owe this expression, but not the context of its use, to Sidney Morgenbesser.


6. An earlier version of this essay—which first appeared in the September, 1965 Commentary—was delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on Jewish Social Studies, held at the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, May 18, 1965. The conference topic was "Jewish Writers and the New American Literary Establishment."


11. See a subsequent battle in this status-war in James Baldwin and Shlomo Katz, "Of Angela Davis and 'the Jewish Housewife Headed for Dachau': An Exchange" in Midstream (June/July, 1971), with letters in comment.


15. "Questions for Thinking Jews" (A Symposium), Jewish Heritage (Summer, 1965).


17. Harold Cruse, "My Jewish Problem and Theirs," in Hentoff, op. cit. This essay is, of course, the black intellectual retort to Norman Podhoretz's well-known "My Negro Problem—and Ours," which first appeared in Commentary and has since been reprinted in Podhoretz's Doings and Undoings.


21. Cf. "The World and the Jug," Ellison's reply, in Shadow and Act (New York: Random House, 1964). In the next decade, Howe was to make a complete about-face, repeating in the '60's with authority all the things Trilling had been at pains to tell him in the '50's.


25. The Structure of Social Action: A Study in Social Theory With Special References to a Group of Recent European Writers, 2nd Edition (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1949).