



PROJECT MUSE®

Bernard Malamud in Italy: Moral Courage and the Choice of Being Jewish in
“The Lady of the Lake”

Samuel Joseph Kessler

Studies in American Jewish Literature, Volume 36, Number 1, 2017, pp. 40-60
(Article)

Published by Penn State University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/650177>

**BERNARD MALAMUD
IN ITALY: MORAL
COURAGE AND THE CHOICE
OF BEING JEWISH IN
“THE LADY OF THE LAKE”**

SAMUEL JOSEPH KESSLER VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC
INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Examined as a whole, Bernard Malamud's short story collection *The Magic Barrel* is more cosmopolitan moralism than ghetto tale, where Jews remain central protagonists but the particularities of Jewish life and suffering lose much of their cultural identification as Malamud reaches toward a universal ethical truth. I argue here that through the close reading of one those short stories, "The Lady of the Lake," we can complement the general scholarly assessment of Malamud's vision (of "Jews" as universals) with another, this one of Jews and Jewishness as in themselves the pathway to morality. "The Lady of the Lake" reveals Malamud at his most attuned to the complexities of Jewish self-recognition, where he thought that the ethical lay in the act of affirming one's Jewish self-being.

KEYWORDS: Bernard Malamud, Judaism, ethics, morality, Paul Tillich

The Magic Barrel, one of Bernard Malamud's finest short story collections and the winner of the 1959 National Book Award for fiction, contains thirteen tales roughly set in the ten years following the Second World War.¹ Malamud, a native New Yorker and later a professor at Bennington College in Vermont, has long been recognized for his contributions to American and Jewish American fiction.² Though today his works less frequently anchor scholarship, they continue to

influence the landscape of American letters and have been central in informing the ongoing scholarly conversation about the variation and substance of Jewish American fiction.³ Despite niche marketing as “Jewish fiction,” however, examined as a whole *The Magic Barrel* appears to be more cosmopolitan moralism than ghetto tale, where Jews remain central protagonists but the particularities of Jewish life and suffering lose much of their cultural identification as Malamud reaches toward a universal ethical truth. As one reviewer of a later Malamud work wrote, “It is. . . the suffering that redeems, not the life (that’s impossible) but the spirit, and [it is] the sense of responsibility of each man for his neighbor that constitutes the ‘Jewish’ component in his parables.”⁴ On the whole, Malamud’s work is considered by many scholars to be a pluralist vision of humanity where individual differences are subsumed into a larger narrative of moral idealism. Writes Pirjo Ahokas, “Malamud’s appropriation of Jewishness for his literary purposes is shown in the fact that while he offers the ethical code of *menschlichkeit* as the positive definition of Jewishness in his work, it is. . . synonymous with his secular code.”⁵ Similarly, Marc Ratner writes: “The general theme of Malamud’s work is the humanistic value of suffering as a way toward man’s ennoblement and enlightenment.”⁶ And Victoria Aarons says, “Bernard Malamud is the moralist, the humanist, for whom ‘what it means to be human’ is an acknowledgement of one’s incontestable yet always tested responsibility for others. For Malamud. . . [compassion] is central to the Jewish and human enterprise. For ‘what it means to be human,’ is, in Malamud’s universe, what it means to be Jewish.”⁷

Yet a vision of universal morality is not the only sort of ethics one finds in Malamud’s work. Through a close reading of the story “The Lady of the Lake,” from *The Magic Barrel*, and by applying a lens of religious studies alongside that of literary studies, I believe that we can complement the general scholarly assessment of Malamud’s vision (i.e., of “Jews” as universals) with another, this one identifying individual Jewish identity as central to Malamud’s framework for what represents the ethical and how that ethical comes to be constructed in the world. As I argue at the end of this article, Malamud’s affirmation that being born a Jew makes one inescapably a Jew—and that that inescapability arises from larger historical processes over which the individual has no control—must remain a central component in our interpretation of his ethical system as he elucidates it in his writings. What interested Malamud were the moral implications of such seemingly fixed categories as Jewish identity. How obligated must one be to an invisible inheritance? Is one responsible more to other Jews than to non-Jews, and if so, how can that be and why should it be so, seeing as one did not choose one’s status as a Jew, or they theirs? At their foundation, such questions are ones of religious identity, meaning making, and the acts of being and becoming.

In an attempt to address such issues as presented in “The Lady of the Lake” as well as to suggest some larger theoretical questions about Malamud and his

understanding of the ethical within the formation of Jewish identity, this article is divided into three parts. In the first, I look at Malamud and Judaism in the works of other scholars. This first section provides a basic language for beginning to find Malamud's place in literary constructions of Jewish identity. However, I ultimately believe that these conversations fall short.

In the second section, I re-narrate Malamud's story through the lens of Jewish self-identity. I argue that the *Jewishness* of the central protagonist Henry Levin/Freeman in "The Lady of the Lake" is the moral crux around which the story turns. I argue that what Henry construes as insignificant and mere happenstance decisions concerning his Judaic self-identity, Malamud actually designates as crucial acts of self-fashioning. Henry's failure to recognize the difference between self-identity and play-acting results in his personal unhappiness and exposes his ethical failings.

In the third part, I suggest that we understand Malamud's idea of Jewish identity through the language of the philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich. Tillich's theological existentialism, and especially his conceptualization of "courage," offers a theorization of identity and the creation of self that is at the center of Malamud's construction of Judaism and morality in this short story. Tillich provides us with a language by which to understand Malamud's formulation of the ethical: as the courage of self-affirmation in a world that neither promotes nor respects it.

1

Bernard Malamud was forty-two years old in 1956 when he and his wife traveled on fellowship for a year in Italy. At the time, Malamud's reputation rested on an uncollected set of short stories—published in various respected New York magazines—and a novel, *The Natural* (1952), centered on a gentile American baseball player. Neither married to a Jew nor particularly religious, Malamud's early writings exemplify the complex cultural intermingling and longed-for social acceptance latent in much of postwar Jewish American fiction. Writing (consciously) as a Jew in the decade after the Holocaust and (equally consciously) as an American (born in America) whose mother tongue was English, these early stories find significance and hope in a sense of shared human suffering, forwarding a vision of universal morality and its subsequent spiritual purifications. Writes Philip Roth: "I am not saying—one cannot, of Malamud—that he has spurned life or an examination of the difficulties of being human. What it is to be human, to be humane, is his subject: connection, indebtedness, responsibility, these are his moral concerns."⁸ They are tales of the old medieval sort, burdening a character with agonizing unworldly darkness so that we, the reader/listener, may know what it is to be good, or not to be good.

Being Jewish beyond being American, however, has important implications for the way Malamud expresses the inner anguish and passion of his characters. "The possession of a past," Robert Alter notes, "is a necessary condition for the imagining of the future; the vaster and more varied the past, the richer the possibilities of the future will be."⁹ At the level of Malamud's written word, this "possession of a past" is not always easy to observe. Malamud's stories are sparse in their use of Jewish history, rare in specific ritual or cultural detail. Yet Malamud's stories speak to us so clearly of their age because when we read them they actually seem to propose the very same notion we already unconsciously possess about 1950s America: successful, powerful, free, yet weighed down by responsibility and racial division, hopeless just a few years after extraordinary triumph, fearful of the ghosts of an old world it cannot seem to understand and does not want much part of, and greedy, always greedy, for the newest technology and the next evening at the cinema.¹⁰

What we see, then, is that Malamud's ability to express the conflict and turmoil of the postwar American soul is what he acquires from his Jewishness. Stanley Fish writes that "the Jew as a cultural/historical figure is oversaturated, which means that the meanings that accrue [on the Jew] are in excess of any empirical record and accumulate like barnacles without any regard for the law of contradiction."¹¹ Following Fish's theory, because we (Malamud's readers) expect there to be something universal in Jewish experience, Malamud can diagnose the social (read: moral) conflicts of postwar America through the intimacy of the Jewish character. Malamud co-opts the "oversaturated" notion of the Jew—created as it was not by the Jews themselves but by their opponents and oppressors—to tell a universal story through the particularity of Jewish experience. He undercuts the hatred of the anti-Semite by constructing a moral vision of America through the assemblage of small stories of suffering and hope among the Jews.

But Malamud can only make such a co-option of the Jewish character because his stories and ideas are so deeply enmeshed in the Jewish American urban experience. The Jews who read his stories must trust that he loves the Jews who live in his stories, or else the longing and torment to which he subjects them would turn to simple cruelty. In a 1963 article for *Commentary*, Philip Roth struggled to explain to his Jewish readers just this balance between writing toward universal truth (which necessitates being harsh toward one's characters) and showing empathy for the Jews who populate his stories. In *Commentary*, Roth argued that the actions and emotions of his Jewish characters no more reflected the truth of "The Jew" (a concept he takes to be more or less ridiculous) than do the most vicious anti-Semitic stereotypes. What his Jewish readers are really worried about, Roth writes, is that a fellow Jew is "informing" on them, telling the rest of the world *how much like them* the Jews really are. To this Roth responds, "The success of the struggle against the defamation of Jewish character. . . has itself made more pressing the

need for a Jewish self-consciousness that is relevant to this time and place. . . . [To] indicate that moral crisis is something to be hushed up, is not of course, to take the prophetic line; nor is it a rabbinical point of view that Jewish life is of no significance to the rest of mankind.”¹² To counteract the anti-Semite, Roth says, is not to deny that the Jews suffer but to make through that suffering a cry for the suffering of the whole world.

Such an interweaving of the Jew and the world might arguably be at the heart of explaining the Jewishness of Malamud’s writing. Writes Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The prophet’s task is to convey a divine view, yet as a person he *is* a point of view.”¹³ While the world Malamud creates in his stories bears little resemblance to those of his Yiddish peers or predecessors, wrapped up as they were in dybbuks, rabbis, Torah scrolls, and shtetls, Malamud’s stories read as no less profoundly animated by the American Jewish experience. Many of Malamud’s tales offer a vision of urbanizing, gritty American cities where Jewish characters struggle through each day and the questions they ask are not those of national or intellectual concern but focused rather on the intimacy and pain of interdependent human lives. Read beginning to end, a Malamud story instructs us in “the moral” in a way akin to Heschel’s “divine view;” but in every sentence, a character’s individual “point of view” remains like that of the biblical prophet’s, firmly and undoubtedly enmeshed in the details of Jewish experience.

Perhaps it is because Malamud unfolds his universal morality tales from such Jewish experiential minutia that contemporary scholars have struggled to understand the balance between Malamud’s Jewishness and his universal vision. Writes Edward Abramson:

My contention is that Bernard Malamud is not only far from being an author concerned with the plight of one small group of humanity [the Jews], but that when he treats Jewish matters, most often he universalized Jews, Jewish culture, history, and Judaism to such an extent as to render them no more than bases from which to explore the human condition. . . . In fact, in what I call Malamud’s “Jewish writings,” Jewishness and Judaism most frequently disappear into metaphor. He is not so much “good for the Jews” as good for humanity.¹⁴

And Leah Garrett notes that

given that English works (unlike those in Yiddish) would be read by non-Jews, [Malamud is] uncomfortable creating Jewish characters with negative qualities such as money grubbing. The desire to avoid negative Jewish representations was particularly acute in the post-Holocaust years when writers were understandably sensitive about critiquing Jewish life.¹⁵

Following these two scholars, we might say that to cast Jews as universals in suffering and virtue is for Malamud to invest his Jewish protagonists with a certain centrality in the postwar American experience. It is to make a claim that, though Americans are a people gathered together from scattered lands, some identifiable moral core exists in American society and can be—should be, must be—recognized. This belief in moral universalism wends its way through every Malamud story.

Malamud himself hints at this interpretation. The years composing the stories that would become *The Magic Barrel* were also those in which he was settling into his life as a writer and professor, negotiating where he stood in relation to the Jews of Brooklyn from whence he came and to the people of rural America among whom he lived. He remembered later,

At this time I was sharing an office with a colleague who often wished aloud that he were a Jew. I understood the sentiment. I was glad I was, although my father had his doubts about that. He had sat in mourning when I married my gentile wife, but I had thought it through and felt I knew what I was doing. After the birth of our son my father came gently to greet my wife and touch his grandchild. I thought of him. . . and felt I would often be writing about Jews, in celebration and expiation, though perhaps that was having it both ways. I wanted it both ways. I conceived of myself as a cosmopolitan man enjoying his freedom.¹⁶

Malamud's tone, his conception of himself, sets him outside the world of Jewry and its everyday travails. My writings will be of remembrances of Jews, he seems to say, for I have left those people behind me. The freedom he so desires, this cosmopolitan cultivation, becomes the mechanism by which he seeks humanity beyond the Jewish particularity.

Writing stories wherein the Jew transcends Jewishness for sheer expression of the truth of human existence is therefore one way of explaining the arc of Malamud's own life. Imagine: ten years after the Holocaust a Jew and his gentile wife go on cheery holiday in Europe. It cannot truly be conceived, unless what is most Jewish in the Jew (and therefore what had most been hunted to extinction) is reinterpreted as what is most universal in humanity (and therefore what must be most cherished). In this way, reading Malamud becomes a cipher for those whose identities the modern world has most jumbled about, where untrustworthy fragments of inherited tradition confront a vast new continent of seemingly endless personal freedom.

Still, let us be careful not to assume that all of Malamud's tales are crafted alike or possess the same narrative architecture to achieve his philosophical ends. Between 1957 and 1958, after Malamud and his wife had returned to America from Europe, Malamud wrote a trio of stories about Jewish Americans in Italy, at least

one of which, “The Lady of the Lake,” pursued the theme of universal morality through a distinctly Jewish vocabulary and cultural imagery. Reading this story gives one the impression that being abroad shifted—if only for some months, if only for a year—Malamud’s view of Jews, Jewishness, and being an American Jew. This Italian story shows Malamud finding a vocabulary for individual fulfillment not just in the metaphor of Jewish identity but even more so in the actual decision-making that keeps (or does not keep) that identity alive.

In the part 3 of this article I will translate such “decision-making” into the language of Paul Tillich: as revealing one’s Jewishness as a courageous act of self-affirmed becoming. The story discussed below reveals Malamud at his most attuned to the complexities of Jewish self-recognition, of its definitions, of its content in the modern age. And it shows how Malamud derived his definition of the ethical through action, in this case, through acknowledging and fully becoming one’s Jewish self. As Tillich wrote, “Insofar as [the ethical] is the affirmation of one’s self it is virtue altogether.”¹⁷

2

“The Lady of the Lake,” the eighth story in *The Magic Barrel*, opens with the protagonist Henry Levin abroad in Europe “seeking romance” (105). Bored with his life as a floor salesman in Macy’s book department and recently come into some money, in Paris Henry—without much forethought—sloughs off his Jewish surname and takes to calling himself Henry R. Freeman, “tired of the past—tired of the limitations it had imposed upon him” (105). About this Robert Solotaroff writes, “Since [Henry] has not made his way into the next Kierkegaardian level, the ethical, he happily accepts the financial inheritance—surely from a Jewish relative—but wants no part of the ethical imperatives or the suffering Malamud implicitly argues are also a Jew’s inheritance.”¹⁸ Solotaroff identifies a key linkage in the story, that between Jewishness and ethics, that Malamud will return to time and again as Freeman makes his way in Italy.

From France Henry travels to Italy, settling in the town of Stresa along the shores of Lake Maggiore. Initially Henry is enchanted by the northern Italian beauty, the French windows in his room, his large bath. But as he tours the various islands he is disappointed—disappointed in a way that reads as distinctly American, with its unself-conscious demand that a foreign country provide something more interesting than manicured gardens and medieval alleyways. “Gardens I’ve seen in my time” (107), he says to the proprietress of his pensione, although a Macy’s clerk from New York had probably not seen that many at all.

Alone, Henry dreams of adventure and watches the steamy young Italian lovers dancing in the streets late on weekend nights. Having been told of the

enchantments of one more island—Isola del Dongo—he rents a boat and rows out one evening. Something is different about this place and it stirs in him “the sense of awe and beauty he had felt” when he first arrived in Italy, as well as “a sad memory of unlived life, his own, of all that had slipped through his fingers” (108–9). For the first time in the story Malamud gestures at Henry’s life before “Freeman,” linking it to the presence of Isola del Dongo and the dark mysteries of the place. Neither is it happenstance that Henry’s memories of his earlier years and his first sighting of the woman he will pursue for the remainder of the story come in uninterrupted sentences. “Freeman quickly realized a woman was standing this side of a low marble wall. . . . He could not, of course, make out her face, though he sensed she was young; only the skirt of her white dress moved in the breeze” (109). Malamud’s foreshadow is subtle and cruel. We the readers link Henry’s earlier years to the mystery of this island and its inhabitants, and it will be revealed that the woman in white likewise values above all else the terrible memories of her youth. But without regard for hints Henry will continue to deny his “Levin” self, and this will ultimately cost him everything.

The next day Henry tours Isola del Dongo, partly to search for the woman in white, but also because the night itself had inspired a depth of feeling that, since his arrival from Paris, had been missing in his life. On his tour he finally sees the beauty of the gardens. Again, gazing out at the endless variety of the garden “he experienced a painful, contracting remembrance—more like a warning—of personal poverty” (111). Amid the richness of the natural world he feels his own hollow self, his life built atop an emptiness that this beautiful place was designed to obscure yet that pursues him even here in chilling malice.

Henry wanders away from the guided tour, down a path toward the beach he had seen from the rowboat the night before. Sure now that the woman in the white dress is what drew him to this island, more enchanted than ever by the its virtues, heedless of the warnings of his own emptiness, he sits down on the shore tired and overcome. It takes only moments for the woman to emerge, “a girl in a white bathing suit. . . coming up the steps out of the water. . . her wet skin glistening in bright sunlight. . . [a blanket draped] over her high-arched breast” (111–12). She is more beautiful than he had imagined. He is awed and this vision creates the template for all of Henry’s future experiences—the girl as body. No matter what she says, where they meet, or what he dreams, she remains a beautiful female form. She is skin without a past. “And she had grace to lean on; herself also favored physically—mama, what a queenly high-assed form—itself the cause of grace” (112–13).

In this daylight beach encounter, their first real meeting of the tale, Malamud’s description of Freeman’s self-evaluation reminds us of the dialectical trajectory of the story—American or Jew? The girl looks at Henry from the shores of the lake, and Malamud writes, “Freeman was, of course, a New York City boy from way back. . . aware of his background and certain other disadvantages” (112). These are

certainly his Jewish qualities, the ones that make him less of a “true” American, the ones that signify he is without pedigree. They could, perhaps, relate to wealth, though this is less likely, as being *nouveau riche* does not have the same class implications in postwar America as they did in pre–Great War Europe. America, still mostly lacking in dynastic families, is not embarrassed to proclaim newfound wealth. So these “certain other disadvantages” are most likely his Jewish ones.

As for the momentary questioning (because he’s “a New York City boy”) of his worthiness to be with an Italian beauty, Henry quickly recovers his self-promotion: “but he knew he wasn’t a bad-looking guy, even, it could be said, quite on the handsome side.” He had a “nose well-molded,” “well-proportioned arms and legs and his stomach lay respectfully flat” (112). The girl is unlikely to care much for his poor Jewish upbringing, he thinks, but at least he can present her with a suitable blue-blood American on the outside, polished and shined, as best as the country makes them. His interpretation of himself as an exterior form mimics what he loves about her. He is, upon this examination, not the misogynist the reader thought. Just shallow. She wants a lover of equal beauty, he assumes. Not someone she can share ideas with but someone she can share a bed with. Henry, thinking he’s come to Europe searching for romance and failing to notice the dark relationship between the island and his memory, misconstrues lust for love.

As they examine one another Henry “discovered in her eyes a hidden hunger, or memory thereof; perhaps it was sadness; and he felt he was, for this reason, if not unknown others, sincerely welcome” (113). Though the reader still knows nothing of the girl, Malamud’s repeated narrative connections between Henry’s painfully dismantled past and the *Isola del Dongo* provide a clue into who she will come to be for Henry. That he continues to misinterpret these signs assures the reader no less that they are there. Which is why, in a sense from the very outset and without ever really being created, the girl in the white dress becomes the primary metaphor for the emptiness in Henry’s life. Her history, whatever it is, will somehow be the one Henry himself so casually sloughed off in Paris and so painstakingly dismantled from his physique. Her skin, that upon which Henry so fondly gazes, will turn out to possess a sign of the very emptiness of his character. She will embody his act of forgetting.

The point of decision arrives in their very first conversation. “The girl studied him for a full minute, and then hesitantly asked, ‘Are you, perhaps, Jewish?’” Henry is horrified. This beautiful young Italian cannot spend five minutes in his presence without forcing on him the circumstances of his birth. Knowing he can pass for a gentile, thinking this will bring her close to him, and “without batting an eyelash, he said, no, he wasn’t” (113). She appears unfazed, as if the question had been only a passing fancy, and atop his lie adds one of her own: she introduces herself as *Isabella del Dongo*, wealthy scion of the island. The reader, not yet apprised of the fallacy of the girl’s statement, is impressed but confused, precisely

what Malamud desires us to be. To empathize with Henry, we must be convinced his dreams bear some possible fruition in reality, that his willingness to abandon his history (his name!) and live with wafting drafts of empty sorrow can eventually find consolation in supple flesh.

Their meeting is cut short by the returning tour guide, who forces Henry onto the next boat off the island. In many ways this is the image of a father scolding his son, with Malamud's vocabulary—"whacked"—suggesting that Henry is acting more the child than the man on holiday. Not only is Henry failing his responsibility as an adult to treat Isabella as more than aesthetic adornment, but he is also neglecting a more abstract maturity: adults must take responsibility for their own history, their own received identity. There is something deeply childish in fantasizing about becoming entirely new. The tour guide's whacking begins to nudge the reader toward a more skeptical, less sympathetic view of Henry. Malamud is slowly shifting his language, adding harshness to his tone, making us feel somewhat ashamed at Henry, at his behavior and desires.

On the shore Henry thinks of Isabella and imagines what her family's history must be, conjuring up knights of old and courts of honor. "His own history was something else again, but men were malleable, and he wasn't afraid of attempting to create certain daring combinations" (115). He worried about why she had asked if he was Jewish, thinking perhaps it was "to determine his 'eligibility'" or some such, or that she'd had a negative experience, Jews, he thought to himself, "were now everywhere" after all. His dismissal of the question comes exactly as we might now expect it: "With ancient history why bother" even to explain? That part of his life was over.

Henry made an attempt on each of the next two days to find the girl on the island but failed. He wrote her a letter. On the third day, a Sunday, she summoned him to the island in the evening. On arriving he searched in the gardens and found her. "Beholding her, the lovely face, sharply incised, yet soft in its femininity, the dark eyes pensive, her hair loosely knotted at the nape of her graceful neck, Freeman ached to his oar-blistered fingers." She stroked her hair and he was dumbstruck at the beauty, a regular romantic. Again at the sight of her he is recalled to the sadness of old memories: "Freeman. . . could not help thinking as he dwelt upon her lost gesture, that she might be as elusive as it, as evanescent; and so might this island be." He is saddened at the idea, at the distance that can come between two people standing so close, but when she takes his hand and brings him on tour through the house he is brought again into a feeling of warm happiness.

That evening he sees her unclothed for the first time. Watching her dart from behind a bush to swim out into the lake, Henry "had this utterly amazing vision of her, naked, but before he could even focus his eyes on her flower-like behind, she was already in the water, swimming for the raft" (124). He, too, strips down

and gives chase but by the time he reaches the raft she has returned to shore and redressed. Nude but separated, and Isabella coquettish yet aloof, we have a vision as of two people moving along non-aligned planes. They are searching for different sorts of freedom, and though we don't yet know what it is that Isabella seeks, Malamud provides strong portents that it will find little correspondence with what Henry wishes to offer.

The next evening Henry lies in bed imagining the contours of their life together. What worries him most is "the lie he had told her, that he wasn't a Jew," and he interprets her asking about his possible Jewishness as a sign that "quite clear[ly] she wanted nothing to do with a Jew" (125–26). Because we think the girl is the princess del Dongo, Malamud the writer wants us also to think that Henry's interpretation of her question is the one most logically conceived. If she is true-blood Italian royalty, well, they've never in the past shown much sympathy toward the Jews. Why would Isabella be any different?

Yet it is not the most reasonable conclusion, ample evidence of which Malamud has given us, and he provides even more in the next sentence. He might not tell her about his Jewishness, Henry thinks, and let her realize that "it was no crime to be Jewish; that a man's past was, it could safely be said, expendable" (126). This is a complex, illogical sentence. Henry at once affirms his Jewishness, that is, allows that it is no sin that one be a Jew—it is not one's choice what one is born, after all. Yet in the second clause he also says that, though one should not be punished for being born a Jew, it should also not be an enduring mark, that if being a Jew *does* come to stand in the way of some other ambition, then being a Jew should be allowed to be forgotten. It is circular logic: the very thing (Jewishness) that might be seen as a disability can arguably not be seen as a disability; but if it is seen as a disability, a man should be allowed to be free of its mark precisely because it can actually be argued that it should not be seen as a disability.

These illogical imaginings about Jewishness and his attempts to hide it consume his thinking for the rest of the night. The following morning, when Henry awakes, Malamud seizes the narrative opportunity to set the story on its inevitable and ultimate course. Until this morning, the Tuesday after his and Isabella's swim, the reader could not truly be sure about Henry and Isabella's relationship, could not know what elements would lead to its consummation or abandonment. But, writes Malamud, Henry "awoke the next morning, beset by a swarm of doubts concerning his plans and possibilities" (126). What caused these doubts? Freeman's late-night qualms about his Jewish identity, whether he could forget it, hide it, flee from it, or repurpose it. His anxieties could have been about any part of that garden evening they shared—her age, her dreams, her semi-profligate sexuality, her taunts, her melancholy, her different language. But they are not. All else is ignored, subsumed by a brooding disquiet over his Jewish self-identity. Add Malamud's consistent linkage of Isola del Dongo with Henry's feelings of emptiness

and loneliness, and the inevitable trajectory of the story comes into full relief. Isabella, the metaphor for Henry's wanton abandonment of his Jewishness, will confront him with the true depth of his sin in some horrifying way and thence abandon him.

Here, in this plot decision, the underlying machinery propelling the story is revealed. "The Lady of the Lake" is not about the lady or the lake. It is about Henry's Jewish identity and the decisions he makes regarding it. What had appeared in the first paragraph to be an innocent detail ("Levin took to calling himself Henry R. Freeman") is revealed ten pages before the story's end as the radical moment in which Henry's life becomes unmoored from its existential (if not emotional or intellectual) former wholeness. Jewish identity, in Malamud's telling, is not like other identities, which can be linked very specifically to certain moments in a life or certain cultural communities in which one lived. For Malamud Jewish identity is an unidentifiable presence, a thing without thingness, a responsibility and a problem with absolutely no outward manifestations and the simplest ease of being hidden. As Malamud reveals in the story's final pages, the fact of possessing a Jewish identity bridges immense cultural distances, creating an empathic community between near strangers that endows each individual with some amorphous reserve of shared memory and emotional content. This communal space is what Henry has divorced himself from, thinking that to release the "free man" he must negate the "Jewish us." His awaking to a "swarm of doubts" more than suggests that, to Malamud the storyteller who unwinds the destiny of his characters, Henry has committed a grievous sin. By willfully sublimating his memory (and thereby his people) Henry has lost his empathy, his human connection, and his soul.

Late the next day Henry meets Isabella in the town's piazza. She seems distracted, though she apparently brushes it aside soon after stepping near him. He kisses her fingers and then they settle into a tram ride up the mountain to take in the view. They don't talk, and on reaching the mountaintop view stand in silent admiration. Then, as Isabella names the distant cliffs, they both turn to one another to speak.

"Isabella—" Freeman turned to ask her to marry him; but she was standing apart from him, her face pale.

"Pointing to the snowy mountains, her hand moving in a gentle arc, she asked, 'Don't those peaks—those seven—look like a Menorah?'" (128).

Again, just as before, Henry and Isabella exist on different planes, seeming to speak in dialogue but being actually very far apart. Isabella's thoughts return to the Jews, this time with a small cultural detail, the image of a menorah conjured in the distant mountain peaks. Is she testing Henry? That seems unlikely. Malamud's descriptions of Isabella's mannerisms, heretofore so exacting in their mimicry of Henry's psychological state, suggest once again that she is some sort of cypher

for his own inner crisis of Jewish identity. Isabella is “standing apart,” “pale.” Her words are not a test but a sign, a portent. Henry’s Jewish self-recognition is moving away from him, still perhaps within reach but growing thin, weak. Whereas the first description of Isabella was of “wet skin glistening in bright sunlight” she has now become pallid, unreflective of the rosy Italian sky. Isabella is no longer the strange temptress of possibility but the restrained, sickly queasiness of misdirected lust and unwise choices.

Henry, as usual, does not notice these signs. “‘Like a what?’ Freeman politely inquired. He had a sudden frightening remembrance of her seeing him naked as he came out of the lake and felt constrained to tell her that circumcision is de rigueur in stateside hospitals.” The word “menorah” is all he hears. He does not watch her actions, does not see her body in relation to his own. He is still worried that she is an aristocratic anti-Semite, that his chance to sleep with her will be compromised by his missing a piece of skin, that her vision of the menorah in the mountaintops is a ruse to prove his unworthiness. Who but the most insularly hedonistic individual could interpret the mention of a Jewish ritual object solely through its implications for having sex? Being a Jew, understanding what a menorah is, means existentially to live the life that Henry most fears, the life that prompted him to change his name in the first place. Understanding what a menorah is, and seeing one in the snow-capped peaks of the European Alps, is, to Henry, somehow to negate being free. It is to be part of a specificity, a particularity, to acknowledge that one will never be the same as all those other Europeans, will never see what they see when they look upon the Alps.

As his bedtime tussling the previous night solidified, Henry has dedicated himself to being “Freeman” and therefore removing himself from the story of the Jews. He is convinced that if he asks her to marry him she will respond in the affirmative. How pathetic he seems all of a sudden, his love built on lust for her body, himself a stranger to his own identity. No wonder, then, that he can but continue to deny the truth written upon his own flesh as he searches for a way to get closer to her own.

The text continues,

“Like a seven-branched candelabrum holding white candles in the sky?” Isabella asked.

“Something like that.”

“Or else do you see the Virgin’s crown adorned with jewels?”

“Maybe the crown,” he faltered. “It all depends how you look at it.”

(127–28)

Henry did not come to Europe to cement his bond with the “Jewish vision” of the mountains—or, the Jewish vision of anything. But one’s Jewish identity,

Malamud is saying, is as literal as the mountains. It's both the way one sees the world and what one chooses to see in the world. Pick your people, Isabella cajoles; Jews or Christians, menorah or Virgin? This choice is what makes Henry's mountaintop conversation with Isabella all the more pathetic. Henry doesn't know what a Christian European *would* see if one happened to look upon the snow-capped Alps. Henry's answer merely apes Isabella's non-Jewish alternative. Would a Christian tourist actually see the crown of the Virgin? Henry cannot tell us, and though thus far in the story we think Isabella might be able to, we now begin to doubt if even she knows the Christian alternative. So at the very moment Henry is rejecting what might very well be an authentic Jewish vision of the menorah (and his chance to sleep with Isabella), he grasps onto "freeman-ship" in the shape of an assumed Christian alternative, which is really no more than a half-life, a life without a name.

It is at this point that Henry receives the first of two important disclosures from Isabella that finalize the story's unhappy conclusion. Isabella is not the Italian princess she has so far claimed to be, but is only the lowly daughter of the island's caretaker. She tells Henry that her father had encouraged her with him, wanting her to go to America, "but under the right circumstances" (129)—most likely, we assume, with a Jew. She wasn't sure at first about Freeman, encouraging him to stay, saying "I thought you would be clearer to me after a while." "I'm not hiding anything," he says. "That's what I was afraid of," she responds.

For the first time, here on the mountaintop, Isabella's world begins to come into focus. She lives a small, frightened life in a large and beautiful country. She is poor, probably uneducated, alone but for her father, constantly watching well-to-do tourists as they parade through the grand island estate flaunting their postwar prosperity. On top of which she has a secret, whose contours Malamud has been slyly drawing and the keen reader has perhaps anticipated. The secret cannot be that she is poor, that she comes from a family with no titles or grand homes. Poverty is not frightening. Embarrassing perhaps, even a little shameful in the face of so many wealthy tourists, but it does not necessitate the sly questioning, all the hinting and disjointed questions about Jewishness.

The mountaintop conversation a failure for both lovers, Henry and Isabella return to their respective homes. After some self-pity and doubt Henry decides that Isabella's poverty does not matter all that much, that he has savings, and that anyway he had come to Europe to find a "girl worth marrying" (129), not necessarily an heiress. Isabella is beautiful and he thinks he loves her and that is all that matters.

Nothing Henry thinks during these hours in his room after the trip has anything whatsoever to do with Isabella's final words: "That's what I was afraid of." It is as if Henry hadn't even heard her, which quite possibly he had not—in the metaphorical sense. He had not *wanted* to hear her, or better, was incapable of

bearing her, meaning *understanding* her. But why should this last conversation be any different than previous ones? Henry sees what he desires, hears what he wants. He has built for himself a free man's fantasy. Yet nothing is free in this world; and sometimes the payment for things doesn't come in the currency one expects.

Deciding that he must keep Isabella in his life, and absolutely unwilling to confront the implications of her words "That's what I was afraid of," Henry returns by boat to her island. He sees Isabella's father at the docks and thinks that the father has come to collect him, to bring him as comfort to daughter. For Henry the whole world revolves around himself. On the water between land and island, he looks again toward the mountains, thinking of the menorah. "Where had she got the word, he wondered. . . . Wherever she had, he must settle this subject once and for all tonight" (129). On the island Henry rushes to the garden. Isabella is standing among the statuary in the same outfit as when he first saw her, "wearing white, the figure of a future bride." Is this Malamud's description or Freeman's thought? It is unclear. As Henry approaches Isabella turns to face him, allowing him one more chance to answer her question the other way round.

"Goodbye," Isabella whispered.

"To whom goodbye?" Freeman affectionately mocked. "I have come to marry you."

She gazed at him with eyes moistly bright, then came the soft, inevitable thunder: "Are you a Jew?" (132)

This is the moment at which Malamud poses his central question: What is the implication of denying one's Jewish identity? Unhappiness and loneliness, he answers; the sense of being no one in a world that expects everyone to be someone. There are no true "free men," only men who are moored and men who are unmoored; men who sit on the docks and, though not glamorous, have a sense of place, and men who row in-between, who, for lack of commitment, spend so much time in transit that more of life is lived out on the waters than in the embrace of lovers on either shore. In Malamud's telling Henry is wholly responsible for this fate. Henry's consummate narcissism, his ignorant attachment to a non-Jewish identity whose specificities (and implications) he does not understand, and his singular obsession with Isabella's physique, are personal failings. Henry has no right to blame the world for his troubles.

And he does not. Malamud depicts Henry with more honor than that. Which is what ultimately keeps the story consistent with Malamud's universalist moral vision. All of Henry's choices vis-à-vis Isabella are in relation to his Jewish identity, are dependent on his outlook as regards this aspect of his cultural heritage. Recall Robert Alter: "The possession of a past is a necessary condition for the imagining of the future." Henry has possession of no past. He is "free" in the sense of being singular, of being without meaningful connection to any one identity beyond

his own self-presentation. Which, judging from his thoughts toward Isabella, is a superficial one, interested in sexual gratification and access to physical beauty without any thought to the larger implications of human social life. In the end it is not that Henry has separated himself from the Jews. It is that he has separated himself from that most human quality longed for by all people: to be accepted into and a treasured member of a community. Henry's abdication of his membership in the Jewish people is also his exit from human society generally. Free men are lonely men, doomed to wander and be mistrusted.

One last time Henry disavows his Jewishness. "How many no's make never? Why do you persist with such foolish questions?" (132).

Isabella's answer is carved literally over her heart.

Slowly she unbuttoned her bodice, arousing Freeman, though he was thoroughly confused as to her intent. When she revealed her breasts. . . to his horror he discerned tattooed on the soft and tender flesh a bluish line of distorted numbers.

"Buchenwald," Isabella said, "when I was a little girl. The Fascists sent us there. The Nazis did it. . . . I can't marry you. We are Jews. My past is meaningful to me. I treasure what I suffered for." (132)

Suffering comes with being Jewish. Not "what I suffered," but "what I suffered *for*"—being a Jew not defined as suffering but suffering as a sign that one has remained true to one's Jewishness. Malamud is delicate in his definition; he is not a precursor to those who would replace the idea of inherited Jewish identity with one based on suffering and the Holocaust. Though Isabella herself demonstrates no outward signs of Jewish religious practice she identifies with those who do, or at least with those who are descendants of those who once did. Henry does not. Henry has disavowed that heritage and in so doing has separated himself from the meaning of Isabella's suffering. No one who did not go through the camps can understand the horror. But one who identifies as a Jew can recognize what those who did go through the camps suffered *for*. It is this *for* that alienates Isabella from Henry and that Malamud holds up as the true content of Jewish identity. Writes Eileen Watts, "Let me suggest that Malamud's concern is not only for what Jews must endure, but for how they must *transform* themselves to continue living in a world that orchestrated and tacitly condoned their attempted extinction."¹⁹ If one would rather see the Virgin's crown in the mountaintops, such a person cannot understand *for what* the Jews were shipped away to slaughter.

So what about Malamud's description of Isabella dressed all in white? If she is not to be Freeman's bride, why invoke the image? Perhaps Malamud is depicting Isabella as the Sabbath bride, the escort to the Jewish people as they meet the Lord in their holy hour: "Come, my Beloved, to greet the bride; let us welcome the Sabbath."²⁰ Malamud would have known the line from childhood. Isabella's decision

to marry a Jew is made, her boundaries drawn, her loyalties secured. Say the kabbalists: at the end of the week when all is done, after oaths are uttered and battles waged, goods are bought and sold and children loved and scolded, the bride returns to her people, each and every Friday eve, always. So too in Jewish theological literature the People of Israel is often depicted as bride to the Lord's bridegroom. (This is the chief rabbinical interpretation of the Song of Songs.) It is not clear how learned, or even in fact how interested, Malamud was in specifically Jewish liturgical imagery. But the parallels are inescapable and are made stronger by his suggestion that Jewishness is not *suffering* but *suffering for*, and that part of the content of the *for* is this unique historical *empathy* between Jewish people everywhere. Henry lacks that empathy, and therefore forsakes the right to be loved by Isabella.

Seeing her tattooed breast may actually be the first instance in which Isabella gains some deeper humanity in Henry's eyes—when she transforms from a timeless nymphet to an actual woman. Many Malamud scholars have made note of this intrusion of the Holocaust at the story's end.²¹ It is a valid observation, and does seem to fit with the single-line inclusion of Holocaust references in many of Malamud's stories. But because the Nazis literally inscribed Jewish identity into skin, and because in Jewish tradition it is only the males who are outwardly marked, Malamud has interwoven these two themes (and the concomitant attempts to hide them) into a single tale of incompatible desires. Henry can hide his circumcision (worrying at one point that he did not hide it well enough), and Isabella can hide her tattoo (likely the reason she does not let Freeman near on the raft the night they went winning in the lake), but identifications of Jewishness are more than what is inscribed on the body. Being Jewish is an existential commitment; it is a courage to be.

3

As I suggested in the opening pages of this article, Malamud uses the particularities of Jewishness to access universal feelings of loss, sadness, and memory. But Jewishness is likewise a mark of unique identity, both humanly transcendent and distinct. What emerges through a close reading of "The Lady of the Lake" is how these two elements—universality and particularity—get caught up in a complex web of individual decisions and interpersonal situations. One language for understanding this sort of self-identity making comes from existentialism, where meaning arises not from a metaphysical essence but from the continued act of being. Adding to this the theological empathies of Paul Tillich, and we arrive at a religious existentialism that seems to more accurately depict Malamud's formulation of the ethical than those posed by other scholars. Tillich reintroduces the metaphysical to existentialism, first by adopting the Nietzschean idea of self-transcendence ("the self which surpasses the self" [28–29]), and then arguing that the ethical is the measure of the space between one's attempt at self-actualization and the uppermost limit we

can imagine for self-transcendence. God resides (God is?) in the gathering together of surpassed selves, and the measure of a person's ethical stance is in how much courage she or he devotes to the task of one's own being: "the moral character of courage remains incomprehensible without its ontological character" (31).

In "The Lady of the Lake," Malamud suggests that the ethical arises from the courage of his Jewish characters to self-affirm that Judaism. Any sort of meta-power Judaism might possess—whether it be divine, historical, or narrative—likewise resides in the space created by affirmed Jewish selves. In this sense, Malamud's idea of Jewish morality is not "religious" and does not come from "religion;" that is, he does not think that Judaism's ethics is ultimately derived from praying or eating kosher food or observing the Sabbath. Instead, the being of Jewishness is a form of self-fashioning dictated by the exigencies and peculiarities of history. One is born a Jew, and therefore one must courageously pursue the self-actualization of that Jewishness.

With Malamud, the fulfillment of this self-actualization often looks a great deal like universal humanism. And this is where—reminding readers of the first part of this article—I believe that some of Malamud's interpreters have been misled. It does seem possible that, at its most perfected, Malamud's vision of a self-actualized Judaism is synonymous with universal humanism. But importantly, Malamud does not divorce ethics from the way that one arrives at the ethical space.²² Cynthia Ozick, likewise attempting to distance Malamud from those who interpret all his works as metaphors for the universal, perhaps pushes too far into the material and quotidian and forgets the ethical, which lies beyond. She writes,

Some have argued. . . that his humble Jews are stand-ins for universal suffering: [but] in fiction as in life, living human beings ought not to be thrust into the annihilating perils of metaphor. Malamud easily escapes these transgressive erasures—the allegorical Jew, the Jew as symbol—through the blunt and earthy specificity of his ordinary Jews: census-taker, shoemaker, butcher, night-school student, baker, egg candler, peddler, janitor, tailor (several), grocer (several, failing), taxi driver, actor, painter (failed), writer (several, failed).²³

Ozick is in many ways correct. But she forgets that sometimes the "blunt and earthy specificity" is also symbolic. As Malamud wrote in the concluding pages of "The Lady of the Lake," the bluntness of tattooed numbers on the skin, or the earthiness of a circumcised penis, can be powerful metaphors for Jewish identity, although ones that must be affirmed in order for the characters to realize their ethical potential.

Tillich's language provides a means of interpreting Malamud whereby the Jewish need not give way to the universal or the material. Tillich writes that the relationship between *being* and *the courage to be* is mutually reinforcing, and that it is in the space of this negotiation that we find the ethical. "The ethical question of

the nature of courage leads inescapably to the ontological question of being. And the procedure can be reversed. The ontological question of the nature of being can be asked as the ethical question of the nature of courage" (2). In Malamud's story, Henry equates the bravado of play-acting with Tillich's courage of being. If the ontological question for Henry is about how (or whether) to express his Jewishness, and if being is directly correlated with ethics (as both Tillich and Malamud suggest), then Henry's failure to acknowledge his Jewishness is transformed from a simple question of family history to one of meta-historical dimension. Though Malamud certainly wouldn't take it so far, Henry's play-acting as gentile is indeed heretical, not only undermining but also destroying the very house of God, which is the space created through Jewish self-actualization. For Malamud, Jewishness is at the unalterable center of one's self-position. It must be affirmed. Wrote Tillich, "Courage is the affirmation of one's essential nature, one's inner aim or entelechy" (2).

Through Tillich, we come to see that the details in this short story reveal Malamud's view of Jewish identity as one that must be both self-affirming and self-surpassing. After surviving so much cruelty in history, one's Jewishness is what remains the surest part of identity, and it is what creates a moral space where one otherwise might not exist. "The courage to be is the ethical act in which man affirms his own being in spite of those elements of his existence which conflict with his essential self-affirmation" (3). For Henry, the promises of anonymity in Europe, royalty and money, and feminine beauty, are those elements in conflict with his essential self. He runs to Europe to disappear from his being a Jew. But one cannot disappear from one's being. In the end, Malamud arrives at an ethical place where holding onto one's Jewish identity, even at the cost of love or wealth or honor, is depicted as the highest good. Isabella embodies Malamud's ideal of Jewish self-actualization, which is as one that keeps the Jewish people together but that has sloughed off the medieval rabbinic cloak in which it had so long been bound up. "I treasure what I suffered for" she says. Not for the right to pray three times a day and say "Hear, O Israel," as had the martyrs of the Talmud suffered under the Romans. She has courageously suffered for the right to express difference, to do it as part of a group (the Jews), and to recognize its ethical worth alongside all the other ways of living in this world.

SAMUEL J. KESSLER is currently the Postdoctoral Fellow in Judaic Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. He received his Ph.D. from the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2016. His work focuses on the transformation of Jewish religious practice in response to urbanization and civil emancipation. His book manuscript, "The Transformation of Judaism: Rabbis, Synagogues, and Preaching in Nineteenth-Century Central Europe," traces the development and importance of the rabbi's sermon and the

monumental synagogue within German-speaking Jewry in the decades following the 1848 revolutions.

NOTES

The author wishes to thank Dr. Jonathan Hess (UNC Chapel Hill) for initial encouragement and advice in the early stages of this article, as well as the anonymous reviewers and most especially the editor of SAJL, Dr. Benjamin Schreier. Dr. Schreier's continued suggestion and critique has made this article much more than it would otherwise have been.

1. Bernard Malamud, *The Magic Barrel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958). Subsequent citations are to this edition.
2. In early 2014, Cynthia Ozick reviewed the the Library of America's Bernard Malamud volumes for the *New York Times Book Review* (Cynthia Ozick, "Judging the World: The Library of America's Bernard Malamud Collections," *New York Times*, March 13, 2014). In her review, she wrote: "His landscapes, nature's and the mind's, are inimitable; the Malamudian sensibility, its wounded openness to large feeling, has had no successors. . . . A new generation, mostly unacquainted with the risks of uncompromising and hard-edged compassion, deserves Malamud even more than the one that made up his contemporary readership."
3. See Victoria Aarons, "American Jewish Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction After 1945*, ed. John N. Duvall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 129-141; and Evelyn Avery, ed. *The Magic Worlds of Bernard Malamud* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).
4. Thomas Lask, "The Creative Itch," *New York Times*, May 3, 1969.
5. Pirjo Ahokas, "Through the Ghetto to Giotto: The Process of Inner Transformation in Malamud's 'Last Mohican,'" *American Studies in Scandinavia* 19 (1987): 60.
6. Marc L. Ratner, "Style and Humanity in Malamud's Fiction," *The Massachusetts Review* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1964): 663-4.
7. Aarons, "Jewish American Fiction," 132.
8. Philip Roth, "Writing American Fiction" *Commentary* 31, no. 3 (March 1961): 129.
9. Robert Alter, *Defenses of the Imagination: Jewish Writers and the Modern Historical Crisis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1977), 9.
10. In the postwar years "[t]he Jew was engaging America, whether for good or otherwise, and Jewish writers refereeing the encounter portrayed it along lines of sociological differentiation. . . . [In the 1950s] the more America felt its age and the shrinking opportunities for renewal or even improvement, the more Jewish ghetto experience could provide the model for a new sensibility. . . . The accusation once leveled against the outsider has become his password into the inner circle of belonging" (Ruth R. Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971], 74, 75, 79).
11. Stanley Fish, "What's Up with the Jews," *New York Times Opinionator Blog*, May 23, 2011.
12. Philip Roth, "Writing about Jews," *Commentary* (December 1963): 451.

13. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969), x. Emphasis original.
14. Edward A. Abramson, "Bernard Malamud and the Jews: An Ambiguous Relationship," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 24 (1994): 147.
15. Leah Garrett, "Just One of the Goys: Salinger's, Miller's, and Malamud's Hidden Jewish Heroes," *AJS Review* 34, no. 2 (November 2010): 174.
16. Bernard Malamud, *The Stories of Bernard Malamud* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983), ix.
17. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954 [1952]), 28. Subsequent citations are to this edition.
18. Robert Solotaroff, *Bernard Malamud: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), 61.
19. Eileen H. Watts, "Not True Although Truth: The Holocaust's Legacy in Three Malamud Stories: 'The German Refugee,' 'Man in the Drawer,' and 'The Lady of the Lake,'" *The Magic Worlds of Bernard Malamud*, ed. Evelyn Avery (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 140. Italics in original.
20. Translation by Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks, *The Koren Siddur, American Edition* (Jerusalem: Koren, 2009).
21. Emily Miller Budick writes, "One response to the impossibility of language to represent the unrepresentable event of the Holocaust has been just such a privileging of 'silence' as the only decorous way of responding to what cannot be said" ("The Holocaust in the Jewish American Literary Imagination," *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, ed. Michael P. Kramer and Hana Wirth-Nesher [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 221). Charles Poore argues that "[Henry Levin,] appearing as affluent as Europeans expect all Americans to be. . . falls in love with a girl who pretends to be a princess. This, as all who remember yesterday's light novels and light operas know, is about as antique a romantic plot as you can find in a hard search among literature's warehouses. If it is saved by Mr. Malamud—and I'm not convinced that he has salvaged it—we must concentrate on the special air of fantasy he achieves at the end, and the suggestion of the modern world's barbarism he has placed at the heart of it. . . . We need to be reminded of the Hitlerian time of barbarism as we face today's growing spread of despotism. The stories in *The Magic Barrel* do not dwell on it at any length, but they evoke it in a phrase, a descriptive passage, a memory of irremediable sorrow" (*New York Times*, May 10, 1958). And Christof Wegelin writes, "And [Levin's] hope for a romantic marriage to nobility collapses not because the lady he courts turns out to be only the caretaker's daughter, not because she is less than he imagined, but because she treasures what she has suffered for in Buchenwald, treasures, that is, the very Jewish solidarity which he has denied by changing his name" ("The American Schlemiel Abroad: Malamud's Italian Stories and the End of American Innocence," *Twentieth Century Literature* 19, no. 2 [April 1973]: 79).
22. Though it is outside of the scope of this article to argue for examples from other Malamud stories, I believe that this interpretation holds true for them as well.
23. Ozick, "Judging the World."