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The Interrupted Journey in Malamud's Fiction

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In Bernard Malamud's first novel, The Natural, Roy Hobbs sets out on a journey full of promise. He travels by train from the countryside to the big city of Chicago for a major league baseball tryout. In hindsight, one might argue that if the journey had continued uninterrupted and Hobbs had impressed the Chicago Cubs team officials, he would have been offered a professional contract, thereby launching his baseball career: a journey successfully completed. However, the journey is interrupted. The interruption seems innocuous — a doctor stops the train with his car in order to treat a patient on-board — but it is during the delay that problems arise. In spite of the porter's warning that the delay means "trouble" (23), Hobbs gets off the train, crosses the tracks to a carnival, and displays his baseball prowess in front of a crazed woman, Harriet Bird, who murders star athletes in their prime. She decides to make Hobbs her next victim.

Malamud's inaugural novel features a journey paradigm consisting of three clear stages: the unheeded warning; journey interrupted; and destination altered. Malamud's version of the journey metaphor becomes paradigmatic because it is adhered to so closely in several of his novels. The journey metaphor is not uncommon in literature and it has been noted that Malamud's interest in this metaphor puts him firmly within the American canon: "From Huck Finn to Jay Gatsby [. . .] over and over again in American literature we meet people who are in transit, looking for rebirth" (Yardley 1). While the reappearance of this metaphor in Malamud may seem hopeful, trouble develops for his protagonists when they begin to travel from, rather than to, something: in other words, the journey becomes an escape. In an interview, Malamud once spoke of the significance of the so-called prison motif in his work: "I conceive this as the major battle in life, to transcend the self—extend one's realm of freedom" (Malamud, Paris 15). The difference between escape and transcendence is at the heart of the interrupted journey paradigm. The reader of Malamud's long fiction becomes accustomed to heroes for whom transcendence is an unknown concept, as they blunder through life seemingly oblivious to the errors of their ways. Jonathan Baumbach ascribes the fallibility of Malamud's heroes to the fact that the author himself is of two minds about fate: "A romantic, Malamud writes of heroes; a realist, he writes of their defeats" (22). This view fits in well with the paradoxical conclusions that may be drawn from the interrupted journey paradigm. Malamudian heroes think they have chosen the easier of two paths when, in fact, they have selected the road to pain and suffering.

However, there are as many interpretations of Malamud as there are interpreters. It has also been argued that: The Natural is concerned primarily with “the infantilism of the American hero” (Wasserman 52); and that the Fisher King myth is at the center of Malamud’s first four novels (Mellard 102). The Natural is perhaps the most heavy-handed of Malamud’s fiction. Laden with metaphors and symbols, it represents a fusion of baseball history and Arthurian legend (Wasserman 49). Malamud himself explained this fusion as a marriage of creative necessity:

Baseball flat is baseball flat. I had to do something else to enrich the subject. I love metaphor. It provides two loaves where there seems to be one. Sometimes it throws in a load of fish. The mythological analogy is a system of metaphor. It enriches the vision without resorting to montage. (Malamud, *Paris* 13)

Yet the recurrence of the journey metaphor in Malamud’s fiction suggests that it serves a greater purpose than that of literary enrichment. In The Natural, as in A New Life and The Fixer, the interrupted journey reveals shortcomings in the protagonist’s moral character. Until the protagonist learns to accept his fate, he will never reach his destination- let alone find contentment.

The unheeded warning serves an important role in the interrupted journey paradigm, as it points to the protagonist’s lack of self-knowledge and poor judgment. In The Natural, the most blatant warning goes both unheeded and, ironically, unrecognized. When the train is stopped by the doctor’s car on the tracks, the porter, Eddie, proclaims: “Oh, oh, trouble, we never stop here” (23). Hobbs then gets off the train, crosses the tracks, and engages in a contest of skill with “he Whammer,” an aging baseball superstar. The Whammer has challenged Hobbs to strike him out on three pitched balls. After Hobbs’s victory, Harriet Bird, the murderer of athletes who had earlier shown interest in the Whammer, attaches herself to Hobbs. Thus, if Hobbs had stayed on the train he would not have defeated the Whammer, nor would he have attracted the attention of Harriet Bird.

Perhaps in order to make the sudden alteration of the protagonist’s destiny seem less arbitrary, Malamud makes frequent allusions to luck in the scenes leading up to the journey’s interruption. In The Natural, before the train stoppage, Hobbs cuts himself shaving twice (12). Then he rolls “snake eyes,” or double ones, three times consecutively with the same loaded dice that yield lucky sevens for Eddie (14). Finally, just before the battle with the Whammer, Sam (Hobbs’ guide on the journey) discovers a newspaper article about the murders of two top athletes by an unknown woman. Hobbs happens to be in a different train car at the time and does not see the newspaper (19). These scenes combine to serve not only as a testament to Hobbs’ lack of luck, but as a warning that Hobbs might not want to test his fortune on this day.

A final episode of coincidental misfortune occurs when Hobbs’ strikes out the Whammer. The third strike hits Sam in the chest, fatally wounding him. The doctor who stopped the train then

reappears, still searching for his patient, as the passengers are re-boarding after the baseball contest. He waves a “crumpled yellow paper” and says, in the presence of both Hobbs and the ailing Sam, “Got a telegram says somebody on this train took sick. Anybody out here?” (31). “Ixnay,” replies Sam, meaning, “no.” Before the train arrives in Chicago, Eddie the porter awakens Hobbs: “Trouble. Your friend has collapsed” (37). The use of the familiar word, “trouble,” reminds us of the earlier unheeded warning. Sam dies that night before he can be taken to the hospital. Thus, the doctor both arrives and departs too early, leaving Hobbs, the country bumpkin, to complete the journey to Chicago alone.

While the temporary (and symbolic) interruption of Hobbs’ journey occurs when the train stops, a more serious interruption comes immediately after Hobbs reaches his Chicago hotel room. The telephone rings and Harriet Bird summons him to her own room on the floor below. Without his guide, Sam, to stop him, Hobbs goes to her room and is shot, though not fatally, effectively ending his aspirations as a professional baseball player.

Hobbs’ destination is thereby altered- from Chicago to New York. Almost fifteen years after the shooting, Hobbs reappears on the baseball scene, making a final comeback. He signs a contract to play for the last place New York Knights. He is briefly, gloriously terrific as a ballplayer but veers off course again. As if to emphasize the point that Hobbs has yet to understand the meaning of transcendence, Malamud repeats the paradigm in the latter half of the novel. Hobbs falls for the wrong woman, Memo Paris, ignoring her uncle’s warning to stay away: “I think that there is some kind of whammy in her that carries her luck to other people. That’s why I would like you to watch out and not get too tied up with her” (126). Hobbs laughs off the warning, but his association with Memo leads to his hospitalization (journey interrupted) and acceptance of a bribe to throw the final game (destination altered). Instead of a trip to the baseball playoffs and sporting immortality, Hobbs is faced with a lifetime ban from baseball after the bribery scandal is uncovered by a sportswriter (237).

Thus, in trying to avoid suffering, Hobbs finds it, as indicated in an exchange with Iris Lemon, the representative of maternal good in The Natural. Hobbs complains about his knack for selecting the wrong woman and his failure to achieve success as a ballplayer earlier in life. Iris counters with arguments that could easily have come from Malamud’s own mouth: “We have two lives, Roy, the life we learn with and the life we live with after that. Suffering is what brings us toward happiness” (158). Hobbs agrees that he has learned something from suffering, though he has got the lesson wrong: “All it taught me is to stay away from it. I am sick of all I have suffered” (158). “All men,” as Malamud once said to Ted Solotaroff, “are subjected to their history” (4). In comparison with the protagonists of Malamud’s subsequent novels, Hobbs’ rejection of his own history is adamant and extreme. An examination of A New Life via the journey paradigm will show that Malamud’s views

on suffering and fate changed little, though the protagonist does evolve somewhat.

The man in search of “a new life” is S. Levin, and he receives his warning soon after arriving at Cascadia College. Levin is a thirty-year old recovering alcoholic who journeys from New York to a teaching job in the American Northwest. However, he accepts a job from the wrong college. Levin, dreamer and idealist, has been hired by a vocational college to teach freshman composition, though he does not make this discovery until after he gets to Cascadia. He is startled to discover from the man who hired him, Gerald Gilley, that Cascadia College will not let him teach literature. A stunned Levin protests: “The liberal arts feed our hearts” (28). Gilley suggests that his new recruit might have made a simple mistake. “I hope you didn’t write to the wrong place when you wrote us for a job. Some people get us mixed up with our Gettysburg adjunct, and vice versa” (29). “Holy mackerel, Levin thought. He had written to both Cascadian colleges and had probably confused the other, which had turned him down, with this” (29-30). Levin closes his exchange with Gilley by proclaiming: “I’m glad to be teaching here” (30). Thus, Levin’s unheeded warning was his letter of employment. By failing to “heed” the mail, which contained fair warning of what lies ahead in the conservative town of Cascadia, Levin finds himself at the wrong college.

Levin’s journey has, in effect, been interrupted from the start since the physical journey he makes from New York to Cascadia leads him to a radically different destination from the one he has envisioned. He soon becomes intellectually dissatisfied. By retreating into himself and writing literary observations in a notebook each evening, Levin is temporarily appeased (101). However, Malamud inserts another journey within the journey to emphasize the fact that Levin has not really learned anything from his initial mistake. On the surface, Levin accepts his fate at the technical college, but he soon tries to institute major changes in textbooks and curriculum. Levin’s attempts to alter his situation represent a failure to transcend it. Predictably, this leads to trouble. Levin is set in motion on his second journey shortly after settling down in Cascadia. In a meeting with the head of the English department, Professor Fairchild, Levin is quizzed about his romantic goals. He confesses to being single, though he is considering marriage and “want[s] a home” (48). Fairchild then explicitly warns Levin “to refrain from dating students,” adding, “Nor is prowling among faculty wives tolerated” (49). Levin claims to understand, then ignores both warnings. He sleeps with a student first, and his colleague Gilley’s wife second, thereby sealing his fate at the college. At novel’s end, Levin runs away with Pauline Gilley. While this may be interpreted as acceptance of his fate, his “destination” in terms of the journey paradigm has been altered. Levin gets a family but not a home, and he is last seen heading towards an uncertain future in San Francisco.

In terms of the initial, larger, interrupted journey paradigm, the ending of the novel is significant because Levin does not achieve his original goal of teaching English literature in Cascadia. After agreeing to Gilley’s terms in a messy compromise, Levin gets Pauline along with the Gilleys’ two

adopted children. In return, Levin promises never to teach at the college level again (360). Thus, while Levin departed New York with the intention of teaching literature at a liberal arts college on the west coast, he ultimately finds himself headed further west to San Francisco, jobless, the head of a family of four.

There is reason to believe that S. Levin has evolved as a human being to a greater degree than Roy Hobbs since the former accepts his fate, and the suffering that goes with it. When asked by an incredulous Dr. Gilley why he would want to take on an undependable woman, two adopted children, and unemployment, he replies: "Because I can, you son of a bitch" (360). In this sense, Levin breaks the mold set for Malamud's heroes. The novelist himself described a Malamud character as "someone who fears his fate, is caught up in it, yet manages to outrun it" (Shenker 3). This is the typical pattern of behavior, but it is certainly not the ideal way of dealing with the problem of suffering, which is central to Malamud's work. Levin chooses not to run from Pauline at novel's end. He accepts his fate, which is another way of saying that he takes responsibility for his actions. On the other hand, by accepting the bribe to throw the final baseball game and by rejecting Iris, the mother of his child, Hobbs chooses to keep on running.

The application of the interrupted journey paradigm to Malamud's fourth novel, *The Fixer*, sheds light on the struggle of a Malamud protagonist who resists his fate more fiercely than any of his predecessors. Published in 1966, five years after *A New Life*, the book appears at first to be a radical fictional departure. The setting is Russia, rather than America. While S. Levin and Roy Hobbs have professional training and superior talent on their sides, Yakov Bok is a thirty year old "fixer," or handyman, who "had to keep his hands busy" (9). Bok suffers a fate far worse than that of any previous Malamud protagonist. Not only is he imprisoned and tortured for the majority of the book, but it ends with his impending execution for a crime he did not commit. When asked about the presence of suffering in his work, Malamud once wryly commented: "I'm against [suffering], but when it occurs, why waste the experience?" (Malamud, *Paris* 16). The experience is certainly not wasted in *The Fixer*. Rather, it is (sometimes) tediously drawn-out to emphasize the importance of accepting suffering in order to overcome it.

Bok's journey begins when he leaves his *shtetl* in the Russian countryside for the Jewish quarter of Kiev. Like Roy Hobbs, Bok is a believer in luck and superstition. He believes the adage, "Change your place, change your luck" (12) and after he has been deserted by his wife, Raisl, he shaves off his beard. This action is in direct contradiction of Bok's father-in-law Shmuel's admonition, "Cut off your beard and you no longer resemble your creator" (9). He is then told that he looks like a Gentile. Before Bok sets out for Kiev, Shmuel strongly advises him to go to the Jewish quarter of Kiev, to "stay a Jew" (17), and to "stay under God's protection" (18). In Kiev, Bok fails to find work in the city's Jewish quarter, so he ventures outside, masquerading as a Gentile. The narrator remarks:

“Having been told he did not look Jewish, he now believed it” (32).

Precisely because Bok ignores Shmuel’s warning to remain faithful to his Jewish heritage, he becomes diverted from his destination. Officially, Jews are not allowed in any part of Kiev except their designated quarter. But the lure of employment proves too strong for Bok. One night in the city’s Plossky District, Bok comes across a fat, drunken Russian passed out in the snow. Bok immediately recognizes him as an anti-Semite by the white button on his coat, depicting the two-headed eagle of the Black Hundreds. Bok helps the man’s daughter to drag him through the snow to his apartment (32-33). The daughter is grateful and tells Bok to return the following day. “You may expect something more than mere thanks,” she says (35). In expectation of a reward, Bok returns and is offered a job. He proves a capable worker and Lebedev, the anti-Semite, entices him away from the Jewish district for good with the promise of a job as foreman at a brickyard, contingent upon Bok living nearby (55). The district is forbidden to Jews, but Bok accepts anyway. This constitutes the interruption of Bok’s journey. His identity as a Jew is soon uncovered and he is framed for the murder of a Gentile boy.

Bok’s inability to accept his fate leads to the alteration of his destination. Instead of settling in the Jewish district of Kiev, he winds up in prison in solitary confinement. Since Bok stubbornly refuses to accept any role for himself other than that of victim, the overall tone of the novel is bleak. At his indictment, Bok confesses- not to the crime, but to having hoped “for a better life than I had” (86). In prison he becomes so obsessed with proving his innocence that he rejects an amnesty (294). Even as he is being led to trial, he imagines himself addressing the Tsar directly and uttering a line that could have been taken from The Natural: “What suffering has taught me is the uselessness of suffering” (333). It is not until the novel’s final page that Bok finally admits his involvement in religion and humanity: “One thing I’ve learned, he thought, there’s no such thing as an unpolitical man, especially a Jew” (335). Up until this point, he has insisted that his struggle is wholly individual. Although the ending is far from uplifting, the reader is at least left with the conviction that Bok has indeed “learned” something.

In conclusion, the interrupted journey paradigm is strongly connected with Malamud’s positions on suffering and fate. First, in relation to suffering, Hobbs, Levin, and Bok all become diverted from their original destinations because they refuse to accept their lot. All three characters find their journeys through life unexpectedly, lamentably diverted. And so they lament in strikingly similar language.

Roy Hobbs thinks: “I never did learn anything out of my past life, now I have to suffer again” (236).

S. Levin thinks: “Ah, if I could begin all over again” (160).

The narrator comments on Yakov Bok: “If [the authorities] let him go now he had suffered enough. [. . .] He had learned his lesson — again” (72-73).

Each protagonist wishes for the chance to begin again, believing (wrongly) that a fresh start will bring an end to suffering. However, in failing to reach their initial linear goals, the protagonists fall into ruts, or downward spirals. While Hobbs, Levin, and Bok are convinced that their luck will change if they are only given second chances, change is contingent upon the acceptance of one's fate. According to Malamud, change must come from within: "A man has to construct, invent, his freedom" (Malamud, *Paris* 15). Therefore, of the three protagonists in this study, Levin alone emerges with something resembling hope, for he accepts the tangled situation that he has created with Pauline.

Second, Malamud tells us that those who regard their own fate lightly will be treated in the same whimsical way by fate. In other words, it is not that their luck is bad; rather, to trust in luck can be more than bad. For Yakov Bok it is (probably) fatal. For Roy Hobbs, his complicity in the gambling scheme results in his banishment from baseball for life. The abandonment of one's fate to luck has dire consequences in Malamud's world. It is not insignificant, then, that when Hobbs falls into a terrible hitting slump, he visits a fortune teller (136) and then accepts a bribe not to hit in the final game of the season (209).

In Malamud's fictional world, characters are always faced with hard choices. In other Malamud works that do not involve a physical journey, such as The Tenants, the problem may be labeled "the perennial [one] of the intellectual self at odds with the emotional self — art vs. heart" (67). The protagonist is never allowed to have it both ways. In his address at Bennington College two years before his death, Malamud admitted:

I don't regret the years I put into my work. Perhaps I regret the fact that I was not two men, one who could live a full life apart from writing; and one who lived in art, exploring all he had to experience and know how to make his work, yet not regretting that he had put his life into the art of perfecting the work. (8)

And so his fictional heroes are not allowed two lives either. They must accept their fate-or the consequences of attempted escape.

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