

edited by **Dorothy M. Figueira**



“Minor Minorities” and Multiculturalism

Italian American and Jewish American Literature



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Literature

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eum

Italia, Americhe e altri mondi

Collana del Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi ItaloAmericani
(CISIA) dell'Università di Macerata

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I dedicate this book to Immigrant Families across the United States of America.

Especially to my own family: my grandfather Nick Gentile from Calabria, my grandmother Carmela from Basilicata, my father Charles Figueira from British Guiana, my daughter Lila from Andhra Pradesh and my daughter Mira from Gujarat – immigrants all.

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Paolo Simonetti

“Sounds Like Jew Talk to Me”: Assimilation and Alienation
in Bernard Malamud’s *The People*

It isn’t what it’s talking about that makes a book
Jewish – it’s that the book won’t shut up.

(Philip Roth)

In the 1940s, when he was living in New York trying to make ends meet, Bernard Malamud was stuck by the incipit of a joke he had heard from a friend. The joke dealt with the Jewish prescription of using different cutlery and utensils for milk-based and meat-based food, and began like this: “Once there was a Jewish Indian...” During the crucial moment of a hunting expedition, this particular Native American who happens to be Jewish is charged by a buffalo, but upon raising his weapon he realizes with dismay that he has taken the wrong tomahawk. More than forty years later, Malamud took inspiration from this joke for the basic idea of his last novel, *The People* (1989). His daughter Janna recalled that Malamud was particularly fascinated by the idea of a hypothetical Jewish Native American because, according to her, “it mirrored his own foreign/native being perfectly” (Smith 2006, 249).

Malamud’s parents emigrated from Ukraine to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since he was born in America, he always considered the term Jewish American “schematic and reductive”, as he declared in many interviews throughout his career: “I was born in America and respond, in American life, to more than Jewish experience” (Lasher 1991, 64). When dealing with Malamud’s (and other Jewish

Americans') "hyphenated" identity, we must keep in mind what Leslie Fiedler wrote in 1964:

The moment of triumph for the Jewish writer in the United States has come just when his awareness of himself as a Jew is reaching a vanishing point [...].

[...]

[...] at the moment serious Jewish writing comes to play a central part in American life, the larger Jewish community is being assimilated to certain American values which are inimical to everything for which that serious writing stands. (Fiedler 1964, 66, 93)

In this sense, the term "Jewish American literature" is an oxymoron, and this contradiction is well reflected in a number of Malamud's characters. Malamud has represented different types of Jews in his fiction: Russian Jews, American Jews, Italian Jews, German Jews... black Jews, red Jews – even a Jewish crow (in his short story "The Jewbird") and a Jewish gorilla (in the novel *God's Grace*). His protagonists often adopt multiple identities that allow them to move across borders and barriers, in a process of constantly negotiating relationships and belongings which are often linked to precarious and provisional identities. In a typical Malamud story, the individual self is presented both as a unified whole and as a contradictory, conflicting multiplicity.

The People was left unfinished when Malamud died of heart failure on March 18, 1986. At the time of his death, he had completed a preliminary draft of sixteen of the planned twenty chapters, leaving a large number of handwritten notes and schemes indicating in broad terms the plot's further developments. In 1989, Malamud's editor Robert Giroux published the fragment of *The People* and the schemes sketched by the author for the remaining four chapters, together with sixteen previously uncollected short stories. Despite the hesitant and sometimes excessively rough writing, Malamud managed to depict with few essential brushstrokes, in the one hundred or so pages he completed, the contradictory, tragicomic nature of his protagonist, Yozip Bloom, a Russian Jewish peddler who immigrated to America in the 1870s only to unwillingly find himself at the head of a Native American tribe, the Nez Perce, who called themselves "The People".

Taking the cue from Fiedler's nostrum and other similar statements – such as Isaac Rosenfeld's 1944 description of the Jewish writer as “a specialist in alienation (the one international banking system the Jews actually control)” (Rosenfeld 1944, 36) – this essay aims at reading Malamud's *The People* as a particularly keen reflection on the historical situation of first- and second-generation Jewish American writers in the second half of the twentieth century. These authors found themselves in a historically unique position: not only were they “specialist(s) in alienation”, as Rosenfeld put it, but they suffered from a threefold alienation, just like the protagonist of *The People*. In fact, Yozip is caught between three different traditions, cultures, and languages: the millennial Jewish heritage of Eastern Europe from which he comes, the striving confidence in progress and expansion proper to the young nation where he hopes to make his fortune; and the ancient traditions of the Native American tribe he joins in order to guarantee its survival. The case can be made that, in the same way, Jewish American writers were constantly negotiating between their Jewish, American, and Jewish American identities.

The People can be seen as a peculiar Western that deals with some of Malamud's recurring topics, such as the father-son relationship, the endurance of the Jewish people, and the possibility of pacifism in the midst of a war. Most of all, the novel offers a strong reflection on the social and moral contradictions inherent in immigration and assimilation. Significantly enough, Malamud's novel also explores the migrants' efforts to remain faithful to their own traditional values and habits in a society deeply marked by individualism and rapid change, while at the same time they struggle to adapt to the customs of their new country. In so doing, Malamud relocates contemporary concerns into nineteenth-century America, exposing the paradoxical nature of the young nation's democratic principles that were proudly trumpeted during the Gilded Age – a period of rapacious greed, political corruption, rampant speculation and unfettered capitalism that nonetheless saw the United States rapidly become a powerful nation, ready for imperialist overseas expansion.

In 1870, as the narrator states at the novel's beginning, "the country was astonishingly young and fertile" (Malamud 1989, 4); like thousands of settlers, prospectors, adventurers, businessmen, confidence men, bandits and desperados before him, Yozip, a vegetarian and a pacifist, has lived in the US for five years without a definite purpose, and is still waiting for the documents attesting his American citizenship. He is, quite literally, in a liminal position, or, as Nathaniel Hawthorne would say, "in the gateway between the old world and the new" (Hawthorne 1970, 11): no longer Russian and not yet American. In the New World, "he felt the moment had come to invent his fortune", but at the same time he considers his displacement as a limitation: "He often cursed himself for his restlessness because it added nothing to his life but restlessness" (Malamud 1989, 4). He is initially bent on following in the footsteps of the pioneers, moving westward along the American frontier, but when he finally reaches the Pacific Ocean, Yozip "gave a short hooray and stopped to weep at the water's edge" (4). Malamud makes it clear from the very beginning that Yozip fails to adopt the philosophy of Manifest Destiny in which the nation put so much faith. The narrator asks in Yozip's voice: "If a man did not know what to do next, could you call that a destiny?" (5). This lament expressed (and still does) the experience of thousands of immigrants in America and throughout the rest of the world.

Of course, Yozip's historical and literary sources are manifold. First of all, he embodies the wandering Jew (his surname, Bloom, is the same of Joyce's modern Ulysses), although his movements are characterized by extreme clumsiness and self-abuse, recalling both the wanderings of the *schlemiel*, the fool of the Yiddish tradition, and the random path of a quixotic *pícaro*. For the idea of a "Jewish Indian", Malamud took inspiration from the myth of the lost tribes of Israel (especially the legendary "red Jews" mentioned by German medieval sources). The figure of Yozip is probably based on the tradition of the so-called "Jewish redface", a particular form of vaudeville (somehow similar to the "Jewish blackface") that challenged the processes of assimilation, often in the form of comedy or

parody, and relied on the Jewish impersonation of the Native American as the American *par excellence*. From this perspective, Malamud's "Jewish Indian" comes to ironically identify himself with the true inhabitant of the New World.

The Western novel is a traditional American literary genre. However, in the postwar period, according to Leslie Fiedler, "the long dominance of the Western and the detective story is challenged by that largely Jewish product, science fiction" (Fiedler 1970, 68). At the same time, in Fiedler's opinion, Jewish American writers were also trying to subvert or utterly rewrite the literary figure of the Native American; Fiedler argues that "the Jewish writer, trying to imagine the *Goy* he longs to be, or at least to contemplate, succeeds finally in re-inventing the mythical redskin out of James Fenimore Cooper, which is amusing enough" (98-99), since "James Fenimore Cooper, greatest of American mythographers, tried to identify the evil Indian of the *Last of the Mohicans* with Shylock, and, in one of his last novels, portrayed the Indians as New World Jews re-enacting the crucifixion in the midst of the wilderness" (71).

Fiedler wrote these comments in 1964. In 1958 Malamud published a short story entitled "The Last Mohican", included in his National Book Award winning collection *The Magic Barrel*, about a Jewish refugee in Rome, Susskind, who stalks a student of art history, Fiedelman, eventually stealing the bag containing his dissertation. The title of the story alludes, of course, to Cooper's famous novel. Malamud suggests here that the uprooted Jewish refugee retains the wisdom and moral values stemming from an ancient tradition which, though doomed to extinction, inspires maximum respect (after all, he is the last of his people). Yet Susskind is not only the hunted victim, he is also the hunter: just like the Native Americans in many Westerns, he repeatedly ambushes Fiedelman, anticipating a sure victory. Some thirty years later, in *The People*, Malamud crafted a very different type of "Jewish Indian", a cross-cultural, transracial character, who defies American society with his Jewishness.

The clash of different cultures and traditions is a constant element in Malamud's fiction. At the end of *The Assistant* (1957), the young Italian-American Catholic Frank Alpine decides to

be circumcised and so converts to Judaism. Malamud's characters always manage to cross the boundaries imposed by society, each time overcoming religious boundaries, ethnic boundaries, cultural boundaries, racial boundaries, gender boundaries, and even boundaries between species, as in *God's Grace* when the last (Jewish) man on earth falls in love with a female chimp. Of course, this is hardly a smooth process, and its consequences are more often than not painful, whether it happens through assimilation, conversion, or death and regeneration. Even if this transformation is dictated by the intentional obliteration of one's past or triggered by the willed construction of a new self, sooner or later all of Malamud's heroes are confronted with a renegotiation of their identities. They struggle with a self that is never stable, but always temporary, uncertain and contradictory – maybe ultimately unknowable.

In *The People*, Malamud depicts an historical figure, Hinmah-too-yah-lat-kekt, popularly known as Chief Joseph, leader of the Native American tribe of the Nez Perce, and describes the historical events that brought about the tribe's expulsion from the valley in which they dwelled¹. In 1877, the Nez Perce were ordered by the United States government to leave the lands occupied by their tribe, under the armed threat of two thousand well-organized US soldiers; the Indian chief – who according to William Vollmann's version of the story was not even a war-chief – led his people through a dangerous one-thousand-six-hundred-mile-long march from the Blue Mountains of Oregon towards Canada, with four separate military units in pursuit. The Nez Perce repeatedly fought off the soldiers, demonstrating exceptional military and tactical abilities; then, after the decisive battle at Bear Paw Mountains in Montana, the natives eventually succumbed to enemy artillery and were forcibly relocated to Oklahoma. When he surrendered, Chief Joseph delivered a speech, made famous by the American press, declaring that he

¹ American writer William T. Vollmann has recently reconstructed the several phases of the Nez Perce's war in a massive historical novel entitled *The Dying Grass*, part of his "seven dreams" series of novels depicting violent and bloody episodes in the settlement of the North American continent that contributed to the formation of American identity.

was tired of fighting, and ending with the famous phrase "I will fight no more forever".

In Malamud's novel, however, the story is slightly different from the "official" report, since it is not Chief Joseph who guides the People in the epic march, having died some time before the outbreak of the war. Before his death, he appoints the Jewish peddler Yozip Bloom as the new chief with the name of Jozip. *The People* therefore falls into that particular subgenre, lying somewhere between historical novel and science fiction, called uchronia, or alternate history, where the writer imagines that some well-known historical event took place in a different way, leading to unpredictable outcomes and creating an alternative future. Nonetheless, in Malamud's novel, the protagonist's leadership is not enough to change the tragic course of history, because, in the end, the fate of the Nez Perce remains sealed: the Native Americans lose their final battle and are banished from their lands. Yet, we can say that *The People* offers a hopeful vision of redemption, and this is embodied precisely by the transracial condition of the protagonist.

Just like its protagonist, *The People* is a hybrid novel. Malamud has blended several cultural traditions and literary genres: the Western with its diverse modern and postmodern reinterpretations; the captivity narratives typical of the colonial period; the *Bildungsroman*, or the "novel of formation" distinctive of the nineteenth century; the legends and myths of the Jewish culture; biblical narratives; and even what has been termed Holocaust fiction. The purpose of historically twisting the Nez Perce war is not so much to challenge the recorded version of events, as to add further layers of meaning to the "official" interpretations, and to further complicate the historical context by presenting the foundations of the American nation from an original point of view, which is neither that of the winning WASP nor that of the defeated Native American. Unsure of his status as an American citizen, knowing that his affiliation with the Nez Perce tribe is only temporary, and still tied to his Jewish roots, the Jewish Native American Yozip/Jozip/Joseph experiences a tragedy similar to that suffered by thousands of immigrants who arrived in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century.

If this marginality were not enough, the final sentence of the novel depicting the Native Americans who are being forcibly displaced – “The moaning of the Indians began as the freight cars were moving along the tracks” (Malamud 1989, 97) – is strongly reminiscent of the trains that transported Jews to concentration camps during the Second World War.

Of course, Malamud is well aware of the similarities between the long, dramatic march of the Nez Perce and the exodus of the Jewish people. In this sense, the name of the tribe is particularly important. In his notes, Malamud specifies that the nickname “Nez Perce” is probably a translation of the Indian term “Tsupnitpelun”. This name was given to the tribesmen by French trappers in the eighteenth century; it signifies a “pierced nose” and evokes the old habit of tribe’s members who wore a dentium shell as a nose ornament. In order to become a member of the tribe, Yozip must face an initiation rite – “Maybe it’s like a bar mitzvah”, he thinks (19). During the ceremony, his nose is accidentally pierced by an arrow, and Chief Joseph tells him: “Your nose is pierced but you are not wounded” (23). The rite calls to mind the Brit Milah, or the Jewish religious circumcision ceremony. The Indian’s nose is ornamented and thus enlarged. Given the satirical and picaresque atmosphere of the novel, we cannot fail to observe that a big nose is a traditional stereotypical mark of the Jew.

The Nez Perce called themselves *Nimíipuu* (“we the people”). Besides recalling the chosen people of Israel, the name echoes the phrase “We, the people” in the preamble to the US Constitution, that should “establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for a common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty”. According to Malamud, peace is essential for the development of any democratic nation. After talking with the representatives of the American government, Jozip thinks: “They say they go by democracy, but to me it seems that none of them knows what it truly is” (63-64).

Throughout his novel, Malamud makes it clear that the complex dynamics of assimilation and alienation are strictly connected to language; they are tied to the migrant’s ability to learn and speak the language of his new nation. When Malamud’s

parents spoke English, they used ungrammatical sentences and mispronounced words, because their English was modeled on the syntactic structure of Yiddish, just like Yozip's is in the novel. As a boy, Malamud was often teased by his schoolmates for his defective pronunciation. He hence worked especially hard to learn how to speak and write correct English. Language acquisition became his escape from the cramped space of his parents' drugstore; it was his ticket to freedom.

When Yozip is worried because he cannot speak the language of *The People*, he asks Chief Joseph: "But how can I be an Indian if I was born in Zbrish, Russia? This is a different country, far away, where was born my father and mother. I live now in America, and also maybe I am by now a citizen". But the chief answers: "Peace is the word of Quodish [...] It is the best word" (15). What both the Indian and the Jew, the American and the Russian, have in common is a desire for peace that cannot be stopped by any proclamation of expansionism, but is guaranteed by the democratic promise of the United States Constitution. Peace should overcome linguistic and cultural barriers.

Once Jozip becomes a tribesman, he is sent to Washington to plead the cause of Native Americans before the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. But the functionary replies with a speech that shows Malamud the satirical writer at his best by putting in the commissioner's mouth the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny. His pretentious rhetoric sounds like a comic blabber full of tautologies and clichés that satirize both the patriotic magniloquence of some politicians and the assumed gullibility of their audience:

You must understand that the United States of America is an expanding nation. We grow in great haste because our opportunities are manifold. We would like to set aside this valley you have so much affection for, but we must ask you to understand that our country's foremost need, far into the future, will be land. And more land. We are a great nation with an important future. Therefore, we have to ask you not to make requests we can't possibly fulfill, and which ultimately embarrass us. (32)

Jozip's Jewish origins represent a further obstacle to the Native Americans' cause. When he argues that the valley is the land where their ancestors lived, the Commissioner ironically asks: "When you refer to 'ancestors', [...] do you refer to Amer-

ican Indians or to Hebrews?” (32). It is, therefore, no surprise that on his way back, disgusted by the government’s hypocritical rhetoric and more adamant about becoming a spokesperson for the Indians, Jozip forgets to stop in Chicago and check for his citizenship papers.

Subsequently, a colonel of the US army explicitly accuses Jozip and the Indians of “impeding the manifest destiny of a young and proud nation” (45). Jozip is afraid that he cannot speak the language of the People well enough to plead their cause. The narrator explains: “He had not spoken as well as he would like, yet he heard dignity in the words he had said. ‘If you speak with your heart’, he told himself, ‘the words fix themselves together in the right way. They will say what you want them to say’ (46). Unfortunately, antisemitism and racism continue to mar all communication. The colonel replies: “Sounds like Jew talk to me” (46) – thus dismissing everything Jozip had said because of his foreign accent. A US soldier then incongruously adds, in an even more racist tone: “Nobody can trust these goddamn Indians in any way at all” (46). Yet, despite living in a society that violently represses those who are ethnically (and as a consequence linguistically) alien to it, the protagonist appears finally to manage its language. He intends to free his neighbors, the Indians, by legal means, and so he decides to study law. Unfortunately, Malamud did not live long enough to write the novel’s ending. As it stands, this inspirational denouement remains only a vague possibility.

Jozip’s concerns about his language’s inadequacy reflect very similar concerns Malamud felt in his old age. Before writing *The People*, he had suffered a severe stroke and had developed a form of aphasia which impeded his ability to formulate language correctly. He had occasional trouble finding the right word to put on paper, and so he struggled with every sentence he wrote. At the end of the novel, Jozip can proudly declare: “I speak the tongue of the People better than I do the tongue of the whites” (88). Malamud makes it clear that the novel in its last scene would have concluded with “a Hasidic dance of the recovered self”, but after a couple of lines the very last indication in his notes states: “Leave with an Indian talking” (99).

For Malamud, as for Jozip, language is the most cherished blessing, especially when it is in danger, threatened by the process of assimilation, by old age, by illness, and by the forces of racism and hatred which, like the American government in the novel, want to silence every dissonant voice, reducing language to a standardized and repressive flatness. In *The People*, a character tells Jozip: "It is not wise to stop talking. Some who do that, never say another word" (74). And this is not only valid for the nineteenth-century Jewish migrant, who is afraid of not being fluent in his new American language, but for every minority group in every age.

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