

CHAPTER 1

Henry Roth's First Novel: Call It Jewish?

INTRODUCTION

Recently, at the Modern Language Association's annual meeting, I helped organize a panel on contemporary Jewish American writing. We decided on the topic of "New Voices," and as part of that panel I discussed the work of Henry Roth, a writer usually associated with the modernist movement in literature—hardly a "new voice" that the panel seemed to call for. Indeed, numerous conference participants thought Roth a strange choice for a panel dealing with fresh and new literary voices. However, with the publication of all four volumes of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, we are now in a position to more fully understand all of Henry Roth's voices: the old and the new, the modern novelist alongside the postmodern memoirist. Therefore, Henry Roth might well be the perfect choice to begin this study.

JEWISH AMERICAN LITERARY RENAISSANCE

In *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Gershom Scholem quotes Thomas Aquinas's definition of mystics as people who follow the psalmist: "Oh taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:9). Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* might stand as the antithesis to this maxim. Roth repeatedly asks his readers to taste and see the slums of turn-of-the-century Lower East Side of New York City. Roth posits a more naturalistic motto, perhaps along the lines of "Oh taste and see that the Lord is both evil and absent." Jewish culture, as indeed any culture, is about continuity and the passing on of tradition. Roth as a modernist wrote a first novel of assimilation, of the end of Jewishness; I would go so far as to label *Call It Sleep* a novel of anti-Jewishness and self-loathing. As late as 1963, nearly thirty years after he wrote *Call It Sleep*, Roth was still advocating the disappearance of both Jews and

their culture. In a mid-1960s interview, Roth said: "I feel that to the great boon Jews have already conferred upon humanity, Jews in America might add this last and greatest one: of orienting themselves toward ceasing to be Jews" (*Shifting Landscape* 114). Yet in an act that seemingly defies comprehension, twenty-five years after he gave this interview—at this point he was a man in his late eighties—Roth was once again going to *cheder*; this time not on the Lower East Side but in his New Mexico mobile home. In the late 1980s Roth began relearning Hebrew in hopes of making *aliyah* to Israel. These facts beg the question of just how are students of Jewish American literature able to make sense of the confusing, disjointed trajectory of Henry Roth's writing career.

Recently, numerous literary critics have identified a renaissance in Jewish American fiction. Casting off the gloomy prognostications of an earlier generation of critics who sounded the death knell for Jewish American fiction in the 1960s, these critics have, in my view correctly, pointed to a reidentification with traditional Jewish culture as a hallmark of this new wave of Jewish literature. Andrew Furman has recently argued as such in the pages of *Tikkun* as well as in his *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma*. Furman locates in the revitalization of Jewish life in America "a concomitant renaissance in Jewish American fiction" (18). This new fiction is marked by what critic Morris Dickstein, in his survey of the field, calls "the return, or the homecoming" ("The Complex Fate of the Jewish American Writer" 384) of Jewish American writers. No longer content to give their characters Jewish names and sprinkle a few Hebrew and Yiddish incantations over the course of a novel, current Jewish American writers often engage in a far deeper examination of Jewish American mores and culture. Writers like Cynthia Ozick, Steve Stern, Rebecca Goldstein, and Allegra Goodman have moved beyond creating Jewish characters as symbols and have developed fully realized Orthodox characters, characters who abundantly exhibit Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's mid-nineteenth-century doctrine of *Torah Umaadab*—of being a Torah-true Jew while concurrently being a full participant in the modern world. That the vast majority of these writers are women should not surprise even the casual observer of the significant changes undergone by Modern Orthodox communities in America. One striking example of Orthodox women's newfound leadership roles within their communities is the numerous women's *tefillah* (prayer) and study groups that have recently proliferated across the country.

HENRY ROTH'S TIKKUN: IN SEARCH OF LOST MERCY

Momentarily moving away from the current renaissance of Jewish American fiction, I'd like to go back a bit in time to the dark years of the depression when Henry Roth was completing his first novel. *Call It Sleep* is a book almost universally hailed as the "quintessential Jewish American novel," so much so that it even appeared on Ruth Wisse's Jewish American Canon—a high mark indeed.¹ Yet I would suggest that Roth's first novel is less a Jewish novel than an *anti*-Jewish novel. While recent Jewish American fiction, through a reacquaintance with Jewish texts, has been marked by an embracing of traditional Jewish law and culture, I believe Roth's first novel stands as a pillar of opposition to that continuity; it is precisely these Jewish texts that are parodied and mocked throughout *Call It Sleep*. If a culture must be about continuity and must be text centered, then Roth's first novel fails on both scores. Modernism embraces discontinuity, rupture, the turning of one's artistic back on a culture, all in the hope of reinventing a new culture from new artistic materials.

If *Call It Sleep* represented not only the beginning but the end of Henry Roth's career, he would hardly have merited inclusion in my *American Talmud* canon. However, still unbeknownst to many, *Call It Sleep* was in fact only a beginning in Roth's long tortuous career as a Jewish American writer. In his late seventies Roth began writing again and he did not cease until his very last days in 1995. The four volumes of *Mercy of a Rude Stream* that have already been published stand in repudiation of all that Roth had done in his youth.

While I do not view *Call It Sleep* as a Jewish novel, I do view Roth's career in classically Jewish terms. While many critics have pointed to Roth's fascination with Freud and the Oedipus complex as the driving symbolic structure for Roth's first novel, a variant reading of *Call It Sleep* is in order, a reading which superimposes a different symbolic system for understanding Roth's first novel, and more importantly for understanding the difficult arc of Roth's career: a Lurianic Kabbalistic reading.

THE THREE STAGES OF LURIANIC KABBALAH:
ZIMZUM, SHEVIRAH, AND TIKKUN

In Lurianic Kabbalah, *Adam Kadmon*, defined as "man as he should be," is engaged in an endless battle of light versus light. This light

emanates out of his head and creates fresh vessels of creation through writing. In Isaac Luria's conception of *Adam Kadmon*, this light represents God's name, a word that contains too much light, a word too strong for this world; when it is spoken it leads to the breaking of the vessels created to contain it. Harold Bloom has interpreted this process to be one of displacement, of substitution "in which an original pattern yielded to a more chaotic one that nonetheless remained pattern" (*Kabbalah and Criticism* 41). Henry Roth's penultimate chapter in *Call It Sleep* is a masterful reworking of *shevirah* of this breaking of the vessels which sends off sparks of creation worthy of ingathering and which just might, given the proper interpretation, eventually lead to a *tikkun olam*, or healing of the world. This *tikkun olam* through the ingathering of these sparks does not occur all at once. In Roth's case it took over sixty years for those sparks, first glimpsed in *Call It Sleep*, to once again give light in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*.

The Jewish mystical tradition, far from being a continuation of rabbinic Judaism, is in many ways a radical reworking of the creation story told in *Tanach*.² Instead of the process of *Tikkun olam*, of healing the world through the Jewish people becoming "a light unto the nations," Kabbalah reimagines *Tikkun olam* as a personal process of *Tikkun aztmi*, a healing of the self. After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, the Jewish people entered yet another difficult exile within an exile. The spiritual force was turned inward. Rabbi Michael Lerner retells the basic Kabbalistic creation story like this: "God contracted to create space for the universe to come into existence and filled that space with Divine Light. But the vessels built to contain the Light were overwhelmed and shattered, and the world is now filled with fragments of Divine Light, shards of holiness that are broken and need repair. Our human task is to raise and reunite those shards, releasing divine sparks, and through *tikkun*, bring God's presence (the Holy Shekhinah) back into the world" (xvi).

Roth's first novel *Call It Sleep*, although far from being the quintessential Jewish American novel as it is often portrayed, is in reality a novel which dramatizes the *shevirah* stage of Lurianic Kabbalah, the breaking of the vessels. The central theme of *Call It Sleep* is one of disrupting Jewish tradition, the overthrowing and dissolution of Judaism.

In Lurianic Kabbalah some of the sparks cast off from the breaking of the vessels return to God, while the sparks that are left become the *kelliffot* or evil forces in the universe. Far from signaling a return to the mother's womb or regeneration after David's trolley-track explo-

sion (as several critics have maintained), the sparks that descend upon the streets of the Lower East Side, viewed through a Lurianic prism, enter this world as evil forces. Thus the explosion at the end of the novel signals David Schearl's physical and mental maturation. This evil, adult force will bedevil Roth for over sixty years and will signal his turn from six-year-old David Schearl as an *Adam Kadmon* substitute in *Call It Sleep*, to an incestuous predator named Ira Stigman in the *Mercy* cycle, where Roth will unsparingly document the post *Call It Sleep* years, a time filled with sexual and personal debasement.

The first two Lurianic stages of *Zimzum* and *Shevirah* undoubtedly take place in *Call It Sleep*; the third stage, that of *Tikkun*, the most important in Lurianic Kabbalah, is glimpsed within the whole of Roth's second novel. Roth would struggle with this last stage for over sixty years before approaching the mercy of *Tikkun* in his last novel. In New Mexico Roth would have to undergo a second personal exile from the Lower East Side before he could create Ira Stigman, a doubly exiled youth. Ira, in a Joycean portrait of the artist, eventually becomes a writer; through his individual act of creativity, his *Tikkun atzmi*, Ira enables the sparks of creation, which had become *kelliffot* or evil inclinations in the world, to become liberated from the broken shards and assume a beautiful form. This promise was fulfilled in the writing of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*. Yet Roth's last act of creativity was predicated upon an act of destructive violence; in order to once again create, to break the block that set in after the *shevirah* in the conclusion to *Call It Sleep*, Roth had to reveal the long-held secret of his real-life incestuous relationships. Roth fictionalizes this reality in *Mercy of a Rude Stream* through Ira's incestuous relationships with his sister Minny and his cousin Stella. Here too Roth followed a Lurianic path. According to Gershom Scholem, Isaac Luria believed that man "could create only by catastrophe" (41).

In Lurianic symbolism the breaking of the vessels corresponds to the world's inability to hold all of God's power and light. In Roth's symbolic world, the breaking of the vessels might be understood as the breaking of the novelistic vessel, the form of the naturalistic novel which begins to disintegrate as a vehicle able to convey all of young David Schearl's multifaceted experience, thought patterns, and most of all the traumatic rupturing of David's psyche. David's fractured psyche will not easily mend; long after his charred foot has healed, young David will be nursing the numerous psychological wounds that *Call It Sleep* dramatizes. This fracture in his identity will never entirely heal,

and Roth will be consumed by this split for the rest of his life through his always-changing occupations, religious disaffections, and political affiliations. Through all these shifting landscapes, Roth is perpetually haunted by a split sense of self, a ruptured identity.

Early in *A Star Shines over Mt. Morris Park*, the first volume of *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, Roth discusses the shattered vessel of his psyche, dating the split in self to the moment the Stigman family (clearly the Schearls from *Call It Sleep*) abandoned East Ninth Street in their move uptown to a non-Jewish block near Mt. Morris Park in Harlem. Roth suggests that “it was then and there the desolate breach opened between himself and himself that was never to close” (18). Roth’s project in writing *Mercy* is an attempt in old age to confess and give testimony to the horrors of his formative years and in so doing reconcile with himself. Although Roth maintains that the “void was never to close,” it is through the writing of his narrative and the working through of his difficult narrative structure that he is reconciled and made whole.

ALL ABOARD: CHAPTER 21 OF “THE RAIL”

For all Kabbalists, as well as for young David Schearl, the “question of [the] immanence of God’s presence permeating the world, is a matter of central importance” (Hallamish 184). The famous scene in chapter 21 of *Call It Sleep*, when David’s milk dipper finally catches fire, is an almost exact replica of the scene of *shevirah* as described in Lurianic Kabbalah:

Power
 Power! Power like a paw, titanic power
 Ripped through the earth and shackled him
 Where he stood. Power! Incredible,
 Barbaric power! A blast, a siren of light
 Within him, rending, quaking, fusing his
 Brain and blood to a fountain of flame,
 Vast rockets in a searing spray! Power!
 The hawk of radiance raking him with
 Talons of fire, battering his skull with
 A beak of fire, braying his body with
 Pinions of intolerable light. (Roth 419)

This scene is as close an approximation of the *shevirah* or story of creation as told in Lurianic Kabbalah as we are likely to find anywhere in American literature. David sends sparks flying out from the Lower East Side trolley tracks when he sticks his father's milk dipper into them. These sparks signal his growth and rebirth into maturity and his overcoming of the oedipal conflict. However, David's maturity also signals his sexual awakening, an awareness which will very shortly lead to ultimate evil, and not just the usual devilments which the Lower East Side boys experiment with throughout *Call It Sleep*, sticking a "petzel in a knish" as the act is memorably called in Roth's first novel. Once the family moves to non-Jewish Harlem in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, David's nascent sexuality will seek out incestuous predatory couplings with both his sister Minnie and his cousin Stella. Thus, despite the last chapter of the novel having been interpreted by numerous critics as representing a reconciliation of the family unit, of David's being uneasily welcomed back into the family, these last scenes might in Kabbalistic terms more truthfully represent, through the sparks which emanate from the trolley tracks, the birth of the *kelliffot* or evil inclination being brought into this world.

The concluding paragraph of *Call It Sleep* draws attention to the unfinished business that Roth must strive to complete through the long course of his writing career, a career that spanned most of the twentieth century. Roth ends the novel with the words "One might as well call it sleep," suggesting that David finally possesses "strangest triumph" (441). Yet the novel ends less upon a condition of triumph as in a "trancelike state" of indeterminacy as Hana Wirth-Nesher suggests. Roth and his *Adam Kadmon* creation David are in a state of suspended animation, waiting for the elusive third stage in Lurianic Kabbalah, the long journey of Tikkun which looms ahead as a perpetual state of indeterminacy for the young Jewish American writer.

Although the critics have disagreed over the ultimate meaning of David's electrocution in chapter 21 of "The Rail," most tend to read this chapter as a rebirthing scene in which David reaffirms his Judaism. At the conclusion of the novel David has finally given up the fiction of his *goyish* parentage, a fallacy which forms a recurring subplot within *Call It Sleep*. Other critics interpret this scene as a classic rebirth-into-manhood tale. Caught up in myth, none of these interpretations seem to be troubled that the ending doesn't easily lend itself to even a remotely positive view, a positive ending which would have subverted the modernism and realism Roth had expended so much linguistic

effort in establishing leading up to the pyrotechnics of the electrocution scene. Why would Roth engage in such a radical departure at the conclusion of *Call It Sleep*?

ROTH'S OEDIPUS COMPLEX

Numerous critics have commented on Roth's strict adherence in *Call It Sleep* to Freudian psychology, particularly Freud's doctrine of the Oedipus complex that sets in motion the plot and love triangle of *Call It Sleep*.³ Allen Guttman in his 1971 book, *The Jewish Writer in America*, even hyperbolically said *Call It Sleep* was "the most Freudian of the great American novels" (Guttman 50). Roth himself dismissed such notions, suggesting on numerous occasions that he had never seriously read Freud. In a 1965 letter, Roth wrote: "I don't know much about Freud and I never did." In 1972 he told William Freedman, "Of course, I knew about Freud, but I only had a smattering of it" (qtd. in Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* 165). We need not belabor this point to determine whether Roth did or did not read Freud. Roth was nothing if not consistently inconsistent throughout his long career. There is however a far more Jewish text which truthfully corresponds to the arc of Roth's enigmatic career as a writer, yet to my knowledge, no one has made the obvious connection of Roth's novel to an even older Jewish tradition than Freud's psychoanalytic theory: Lurianic Kabbalah. Harold Bloom has remarked on the many ways in which Freud's secular scientific religion of psychoanalysis borrows from traditional Kabbalah. Bloom maintains, "As a psychology of belatedness, Kabbalah manifests many reconfigurations of Freudian doctrine" (*Kabbalah and Criticism* 43).

Roth shared one more connection with Isaac Luria as well. Most of Luria's work was codified and written by his students. In fact when asked why he didn't commit more of his thoughts to book form, Luria replied: "It is impossible, because all things are interrelated. I can hardly open my mouth to speak without feeling as though the sea burst its dams and overflowed. How then shall I express what my soul has received, and how can I put it down in a book?" (*Scholem* 254). Henry Roth, itinerant chicken slaughterer and tool-gauge maker, from the midst of his fifty-year writer's block, might just as easily have spoken these words. Indeed how could he begin to write again, while he denied the very reality of his own experience, the subject of his life's work?

MERCY WITHOUT END (*EYN SOF*)

In *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Gershom Scholem links Sabbatianism to other revolutionary movements in Jewish history such as the reform movement, the *Haskalah* or Enlightenment, even, according to Robert Alter, "Jewish participants in the French Revolution" (*The Art of Biblical Narrative* xx). To this already extensive list I would add, in Henry Roth's case, literary modernism and communism, before in the second phase of his career, with what I call his "New Voice," Roth finally embraces Zionism as the reigning "ism" of his political and religious ideology.

Despite his intention to make everything new, his desire to break the vessels of art and culture, from our vantage point we can see the dialectical aspect inherent in the modernist work of Roth's youth. Perhaps more importantly, we can see the transformation of his thought from anti-Jewish and the breaking of the vessel, the novelistic form at the conclusion of *Call It Sleep*, to the approaching redemption, the *tikkun atzmi* and *tikkun olam* glimpsed in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*.

To the charge that Roth had little conception of Jewish mysticism and thus my reading of the arc of his career is yet one more symbolic system artificially grafted onto his novel, I would recall Genya's (David's mother in *Call It Sleep*) definition of God at the center of the novel. She gives a classic Lurianic explanation, tinged with the mocking accent of a disbeliever, an attitude resonant throughout the text. Genya quotes an old woman in Veljish who says: "that He [God] was brighter than the day is brighter than the night. You understand?" (241). This definition of an Almighty is dependent upon the irreducibility of God; God is everywhere and cannot be quantified. Or as David, with his six-year-old mind, reasons: "How can he look in every dark, if He's light?" (240).

Genya and David's conception of God is in opposition to the personal nature of God glimpsed in both biblical and Talmudic stories. It is, however, reminiscent of the Kabbalistic conception of a transcendent God as *eyn sof* defined by Gershom Scholem as "that which is infinite" (12). It is not coincidental that Roth ends this scene with David's mother repeating the old woman's sardonic twist on the Kabbalistic idea of the *shechinah's* light. Still speaking of the old woman from Veljish, Genya appends to her story: "But she always used to add if darkest midnight were bright enough to see whether a black hair were straight or curly" (241).

Here in his first novel we glimpse Roth's rejection of any sort of Jewish mystical conception of a transcendent God. By quantifying this *eyn sof* of God, the old woman's second part of her definition comprises a sardonic twist at God himself; the ironic humor negates the first part of the definition. Not only is God *not* without end, but also he is quantified and severely limited. God is only as bright as the difference between the lightest night and the regular light of day. This playful definition of God through light foreshadows the penultimate scene of the novel and the *shevirot*, or manifestations of evilness, the sparks of evil that will enter the world during David's trolley-track explosion.

CONCLUSION

After David has become the unwitting accomplice to the sexual misadventures between his cousin Esther and his newfound *goyish* friend Leo, David flees Aunt Bertha's candy store, the scene of the sexual crime. The narrator ominously reports: "He must hold gnashing memory at bay. He must! He must! He'd scream if he didn't forget!" (359).

Much like David Schearl, Roth also could not hold "gnashing memory" completely at bay; he too was unable to forget the truth of his sordid immigrant past. Long after the sparks of light that showered the Lower East Side had dimmed, the persistent voice of Roth's battered memory churned on. Only after completing *Mercy of a Rude Stream* did Roth achieve the *tikkun atzmi* that had eluded him in *Call It Sleep*. In true Lurianic style, within the act of reading Roth's definitively Jewish work, *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, his personal *tikkun atzmi* becomes transformed into a communal *tikkun olam*. In his second novel Roth collected all the sparks he could recall, those spots of light that remained after the *shevirah*. Just as the conclusion of *Call It Sleep* represents the *shevirah* and the entrance of evil into the world, through his monumental effort at creating a new voice in *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, Roth's second career and second novel signal a measure of mercy and the bringing of the *shekhinah* back into this world.

CHAPTER 2

Reflecting the World: Bernard Malamud's Post-Holocaust Judaism

INTRODUCTION

Unlike Henry Roth with his extraordinarily complex career trajectory, Bernard Malamud, even now twenty years after his death, is still frequently portrayed as the archetypal Jewish American writer. Malamud is credited with the literary invention of “Yinglish,” the affecting mixture of Yiddish cadences and subject-verb reversal within the English dialogue of the first-generation Eastern European Jewish immigrants who populate his fiction. However, beyond his pitch-perfect ear for Jewish immigrant speech patterns there is little genuine Jewishness in Malamud’s prose. In fact, as this chapter will illustrate, Malamud’s representations of Judaism rely more upon Christian iconography than any classically Jewish sources. Malamud’s Judaism is steeped in an ethos of Christian suffering rather than a conception of messianic Jewish redemption.

While one can choose any work from Malamud’s oeuvre to prove this point, Malamud’s lack of Jewish content is perhaps best glimpsed in those stories where Malamud actually attempted to deal with a particular Jewish theme or when his work was inspired by actual Jewish history. Thus, in this chapter I analyze Malamud’s two attempts at such fiction, both stories which purport to deal with the Holocaust.

HOLOCAUST REPRESENTATION

As Warsaw falls to the Nazis in September 1939, Martin Goldberg, the first-person narrator of Bernard Malamud’s “The German Refugee,” sits in New York’s Institute for Public Studies listening to the perfect English pronunciation of his student Oskar Gassner who is lecturing on Walt Whitman to a packed house. The young Goldberg has spent an arduous summer tutoring English to Gassner, an eminent

German Jewish literary critic displaced in the aftermath of Kristallnacht. As Goldberg listens to Gassner's lecture he thinks to himself: "How easy it is to hide the deepest wounds, and how proud I was at the job I had done" (*The Complete Stories* 367).

Martin Goldberg accurately assesses Gassner's ability to hide his terror at speaking English; his thought also reflects Malamud's reluctance to grapple with the deepest wounds of the Holocaust in his fiction. The deepest wounds Malamud does address are casualties of aesthetics and representation, not the barbarism normally associated with the Holocaust. By abandoning a limited omniscient third-person narrator in favor of an inarticulate, first-person storyteller, Malamud—through indirectly addressing the Holocaust—directly addresses the difficulty of creating art out of the ashes of the Holocaust.

For a humanist, the deepest wound is comprised of the millions of victims of Nazi genocide; for a writer attempting to create art out of destruction, the deepest wound and cruelest irony is the inability to write effectively concerning the monumental loss sustained not only by European Jewry but also by twentieth-century history as well. Malamud's post-Holocaust dilemma might be seen in terms of contrasting questions, one humanistic and the other aesthetic: how is a good person to live, and how might a good writer best represent the cataclysm of the Holocaust?

Malamud once said: "The suffering of the Jews is a distinct thing for me. I for one believe that not enough has been made of the tragedy of the destruction of six million Jews. Somebody has to cry—even if it's a writer, twenty years later" (Rothstein 26). In interviews Malamud often asserted that the advent of World War II and the Holocaust first convinced him to become a writer. If this quote helps answer the question of Malamud's thematic interest in World War II—if not as text, then certainly as subtext—for much of his fiction, it also raises another equally troubling problem: Just what sort of Jewish identity has he become aware of, and how will he represent that newfound Jewish identification in his fiction?

In an often-quoted interview, Malamud remarked: "All men are Jews, though few of them know it." This comment has widely been interpreted as Malamud's thesis, which underscores the universality of his suffering heroes. As Malamud says in *The Assistant*: "The world suffers" (5), and it is the responsibility of his good and ethical characters to empathize with this suffering. Consequently, Malamud's characters are judged based on their ability to learn "what it means [to be] human" from their suffering. This universal conception of suffering piety creates

a Jewish identity that is more symbolic than actual. Malamud's symbolic system of Judaism is generally effective in gaining a reader's empathy when he writes novels and stories not set in a particular historic framework, as is the case with his allegorical short stories and his fables, or when he resorts to supernatural and fantastic elements in his work. However, this symbolic Judaism is less effective, indeed it becomes deeply problematic, when Malamud attempts to invest his symbolic Jews, identified with traditional Judaism in name and speech only, with the concrete reality of history,¹ particularly the awesome legacy of the Holocaust. When he makes such an attempt in two short stories, "The Lady of the Lake" and "The German Refugee," his marginally identified and always assimilated, paper-thin Jews are unable to shoulder the awesome historical weight they are forced to bear.

COVENANTAL JUDAISM

In his book *Crisis and Covenant: The Holocaust in American Jewish Fiction*, Alan L. Berger argues that in attempting to distinguish between what he calls "genuine from spurious Holocaust literature" one may focus on a writer's covenantal awareness or orientation. By *covenant*, Berger refers to the traditional relationship between God and his chosen people, a relationship distinguished by two qualities: "the people's witness and divine protection." Jewish history has traditionally been viewed through this relationship. As Berger notes: "Various crises in Jewish national existence were measured against the norms of divine promise and divine judgment" (1). The covenant promised future salvation and created a spiritual reading of history—a means of accounting for historical trauma as divine judgment.²

In pre-World War II Jewish American fiction, Orthodoxy had a marginal role, serving as a point of departure for many protagonists as they pushed away from the old world and all it represented. Orthodoxy was disparagingly treated, usually in the form of the stereotypically crafted rabbi in the fiction of Abraham Cahan or Henry Roth. The rituals and traditions associated with Orthodoxy were used as a contrasting device to differentiate between the old world and the new.

Within the post-World War II push for suburban assimilation, the Orthodox camp seemed like an easy target, a group of "unmeltable" people not willing to make any concessions towards Americanization. They thus opened themselves up to ridicule and disdain and were

thought of as a people with limited fluency in English, with one foot still *shlepping* in the nineteenth-century *shtetl*. As a result, Orthodoxy, with its strict adherence to tradition and continuity, came to represent the antithesis of the aspirations of the Jewish American writer. Ironically, in the post-Holocaust second half of the twentieth century, many Jewish American writers found themselves in the uneasy, some would say untenable, position of filling the hollow identity carved out by many assimilated American Jews, the types of Americanized Jews who populated much postwar Jewish American fiction. Berger goes so far as to suggest, “many American Jews depend on novels, rightly or not, for their knowledge about fundamental Jewish issues. Increasingly it is the case that American Jewish novelists, whether grudgingly or willingly, have assumed the role of theologians of Jewish culture” (37).

SURVIVOR TESTIMONY

Primo Levi also spoke of the theological dimensions of Holocaust testimony. Midway through his memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*, Levi is assigned a new bunkmate. On the march to work they exchange a few words:

He told me his story, and today I have forgotten it, but it was certainly a sorrowful, cruel and moving story; because so are all our stories, hundreds of thousands of stories, all different and all full of tragic, disturbing necessity. We tell them to each other in the evening, and they take place in Norway, Italy, Algeria, the Ukraine, and are simple and incomprehensible like the stories in the Bible. But are they not themselves stories of a new Bible? (65–66)

Berger’s conception of the theological role played by Jewish American novelists, when coupled with Primo Levi’s insistence that survivor testimony represents the holy book of a new theology, presumes a significant responsibility for Jewish American writers, while concurrently presenting them with the dilemma of what to place in the covenantal Ark of this new religion. Bernard Malamud attempted to solve this quandary in 1958 in “The Lady of the Lake,” before strenuously revising his narrative technique when dealing with the Holocaust in 1963 when he published “The German Refugee.”

While much of Malamud’s fiction seems to be haunted by the Holocaust—one can point toward *The Fixer* and *The Assistant* as Holo-

caust parables, because both deal with Jewish persecution, and both Morris Bober and Yakov Bok seem afflicted by the unnamed Holocaust—many of his short stories feature immigrant survivors suffering their meager fates, it is these two stories, “The Lady of the Lake” and “The German Refugee,” which many critics have pointed to as representing Malamud’s most direct concern with the Holocaust. What critics have yet to discuss is Malamud’s self-conscious reappraisal of his own use of the Holocaust within these stories. In writing “The German Refugee,” Malamud is attempting to grapple not with the Holocaust itself, but with the difficulties of aesthetic production not only in the aftermath of World War II, but particularly with art which attempts to either directly or indirectly address the Holocaust, an event which in the words of Shoshana Felman “is the watershed of our times . . . and which is not an event encapsulated in the past . . . [but] whose traumatic consequences are still actively *evolving*” (xiv).

Once awakened to the fictional uses of Jewish history in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Malamud is forced to contend with the troublesome issue of Jewish identity. But if it took the Holocaust to awaken Malamud to his neglected Jewish history, then will his Jewish identification be largely based upon a legacy of persecution and destruction? Furthermore, how are the two separate issues of the destruction of the Jewish people and the representation of the surviving remnants of that lost world dealt with in Malamud’s fiction?

Theodore Solotaroff suggests that Malamud’s Jewishness, despite his Yiddish-drenched inflections, is in fact pure image—a useful representation of a moral life easily applicable to any religious or ethnic affiliation. Solotaroff says, “Malamud’s Jewishness is a type of metaphor—for anyone’s life—both for the tragic dimension of anyone’s life and for a code of personal morality and salvation that is more psychological than religious” (199). Solotaroff correctly explains that Malamud’s Jews become symbols “fashioned to the service of an abstraction” (199). In essence, Malamud uses Judaism as a moral template upon which to judge a character’s process of *mentchification* through suffering.

METAPHORICAL JUDAISM

His theoretical representations of a moral code serve Malamud well in much of his fiction, but such abstractions might be emblematic of why

Malamud generally eschewed writing Holocaust fiction. Malamud's symbolic Jews cannot sustain the awesome responsibility of bearing witness to the Holocaust—the actual (and not symbolic) watershed event of the twentieth century. Put another way: how to represent the reality of Nazism without its paling in light of his metaphorical and symbolic Jews when, as Robert Alter has claimed, Malamud's Jewish milieu is nothing more than a “shadow of a vestige of a specter” (“Jewishness as Metaphor” 31)?

In creating a metaphor out of the image of a Jew (all men are Jews),³ Malamud has severed ethnicity from religion, hoping to render it universal and all encompassing. The twinning of an ethnic culture within a religious system ensured the survival of the Jewish people through their history of persecution and destruction. Ironically, in an effort aimed at universalizing the Jewish experience, Malamud separated ethnicity from religion, thereby insuring his inability to create an effective Holocaust story—one that may properly bear witness to the destruction of European Jewry.

Dorothy Bilik suggests that Malamud's ethics are a modern version of the famous aphorism attributed to the ancient scholar Hillel who was challenged to explain the wisdom of the Torah while standing on one foot. He reportedly said: “That which is hurtful to thee do not do to thy neighbors! This is the entire Torah; all the rest is commentary. Go and study it” (56).

While Malamud's suffering heroes clearly demonstrate the first tenet of Hillel's saying, they certainly don't spend much time with the studying part. Consequently, Malamud portrays a hollow version of traditional Judaism, a reductive ethics that leads to caricatured representations of Jewish Orthodoxy and tradition. Malamud himself pokes fun at this unadorned spirituality in *The Assistant*: after Morris Bober has explained to his clerk Frank Alpine that the Jewish law is comprised of “to do what is right, to be honest, to be good. This means to other people. . . . We ain't animals,” Morris's non-Jewish clerk answers, “I think other religions have those ideas too” (150). The ironic humor in this exchange is obvious, but beyond the humor and irony Malamud suggests that this simple and universal humanism is precisely what is needed to ensure a better world.

Malamud's symbolic Judaism isn't based in any religious system dealing with covenantal (traditional) values, but rather with his own ethical system which, while humanistic, is ahistorical. Through suffering, each new Malamud *schlemiel* must reinvent this social code. It is

difficult to find fault with Malamud's ethics, as voiced simply yet with dignity, by Malamud's long-suffering Morris Bober. However, once Malamud's characters step out of their small, decrepit grocery stores, or run-down shoe repair shops, and assume their parts on the stage of world history, such simple pieties lose their efficacy—they become overwhelmed within the larger implications and need for particularity when confronting the Holocaust through fiction. In Malamud's two attempts at a Holocaust fiction, we glimpse the shortcomings of his abstract and universal moral system, and perhaps understand why he felt compelled to turn to fable and allegory in later apocalyptic works.

A FIRST ATTEMPT

In "The Lady of the Lake," Malamud's first attempt at a Holocaust fiction, published in 1958, he tells a story as simple as any biblical tale: a New York Jew named Henry Levin changes his name to Henry R. Freeman and travels to Europe to find a woman "worth marrying." After meeting and falling in love with Isabella, Freeman proposes to this beautiful Italian woman. On several occasions in the story, Isabella (who also hides her Jewishness until the story's conclusion) asks Freeman if by chance he might be a Jew. Upon his third vehement denial of his heritage, Isabella slowly unbuttons her shirt, thoroughly confusing the aroused Freeman. The omniscient narrator observes: "When she revealed her breasts—he could have wept at their beauty—to his horror he discerned tattooed on the soft and tender flesh a bluish line of distorted numbers" (240).

The story concludes with Isabella explaining her reasons for rejecting Freeman's marriage proposal. "Buchenwald, when I was a little girl. The Fascists sent us there. The Nazis did it." She continues: "I can't marry you. We are Jews. My past is meaningful to me. I treasure what I suffered for" (240). Isabella flees from Freeman, who attempts to reverse his denials, but it is too late, and he ends the story enveloped in the veiled mist rising from the lake as he embraces moonlit stone instead of his lover.

In 1958 Malamud takes it on faith that this image of suffering and unspeakable horror will create a lasting impression on the reader. I would argue that Malamud's misuse of this Holocaust image has the opposite effect on his readers: instead of sensitizing them to the destruction of Nazi totalitarianism, such misuse of Holocaust imagery

anesthetizes readers. I use the word *misuse* as a result of the utility in which Malamud uses Isabella's tattoo. In Malamud's hands, Isabella's tattoo becomes not a symbol of Nazi dehumanization, but instead is used as a cudgel in which to beat the self-hating Freeman into a realization of the folly of rejecting his Jewish past. Additionally, in moving the tattoo from Isabella's arm to her sexualized breast, Malamud has distorted one of the most potent Holocaust images and turned it into an object of prurience. Is this really the appropriate lesson to be gleaned from the horrors of the Holocaust, or is Malamud relying upon an easy plot device to neatly tie up his story? Malamud's simple narratorial moralizing concerning Freeman hypocritically glosses Isabella's duplicity. Despite her survivor status, Isabella attempts to trick Freeman into believing that her father is a del Dango and owner of the palace, instead of a poor caretaker named della Seta; Isabella thus disavows not only her religion, but her social position as well.

It would be easy to comment on the irony of this story and the moral heft by which Freeman-Levin is reprimanded for rejecting his past and for his mistaken belief that he can take part in the American tradition of remaking himself through the simple act of changing his name.⁴ Less apparent is just what Malamud's beautiful creation Isabella values so highly. Isabella rebuffs Freeman because her past is meaningful to her, and therefore she must marry a Jew. Her next line spoken to Freeman reveals just what constitutes that past: suffering. Isabella's treasured past is not oriented around any covenantal or traditional value which has sustained the Jewish people for thousands of years, and which before the Holocaust constituted a communal history. Instead Isabella, like many of Malamud's characters, treasures the reminders of her immediate past of suffering and anti-Semitism. Malamud would place in the Holy Ark not a living parchment representation of the divine law, but the scarred breast of a survivor—a tattooed representation of genocide.

As stated previously, Malamud's characters are typically marginal, assimilated Jews, and the characters in "The Lady of the Lake" are no exception—seeming to have little Jewish orientation or conception of a meaningful Jewish past. Isabella's one reference to traditional law and culture of Judaism is to suggest that the mountains of Italy remind her of a *menorah*, although she quickly changes her mind, calling them a seven-pronged candelabra, ostensibly to cover for Freeman, but perhaps, like Freeman, also to hide her discomfort at being seen as a Jew by a gentile. She is just as duplicitous as Freeman in hiding a traditional past and culture.

Thus, Isabella's treasured past, with which she, and by extension Malamud himself, hypocritically rebukes Freeman, seems as hollow and fake as the Titians and Tintoretos that hang in the halls of the tourist trap her father oversees as caretaker. In Malamud's system, Italian Jews are just as symbolic and assimilated as their American counterparts. Consequently, Isabella's suffering becomes divorced from Judaism itself, rendering her rejection of Freeman on the grounds of a Jewish identity contrived and hypocritical. Through Isabella's conjuring of her treasured past, Malamud has begun to dissolve and distort Holocaust images, and thereby mask and denature the profound historical reality of the Nazi era.

HOLOCAUST SIMULACRA?

Famously Theodor Adorno suggests that aesthetics after Auschwitz is barbaric and that "language itself had been damaged, possibly beyond creative repair, by the politics of mass terror and mass murder" (qtd. in Berger, *Crisis and Covenant* 30). As the Nazi concentration camps were being liberated across Europe, George Orwell, in his essay "Politics and the English Language," spoke of the dangers of imprecise language and the dissolution of language's capacity to represent experience through bureaucratic double-speak and totalitarian terror. In his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard explains the process of imagistic change and rebirth that Orwell decried. His theory on the decomposition of images might help us understand Malamud's use of Holocaust images, and perhaps explain how Isabella's Jewish identity becomes transformed.

According to Baudrillard, an image passes through the following four stages of representation:

1. it is the reflection of a profound reality
2. it masks and denatures a profound reality
3. it masks the absence of a profound reality
4. it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum.⁵

Novelists, particularly Jewish American novelists, creating art out of the destruction of the Holocaust, are thus faced with a perplexing conundrum: they must balance their moral imperative to acknowledge

their history, while hoping that their attempt at representation will not weaken language's capacity to represent their legacy. In "The Lady of the Lake," Malamud has failed to balance these two competing imperatives. His evocative image, a tattooed breast of a Buchenwald survivor, instead of spurring the reader's condemnation of Freeman's rejection of his Jewish heritage, ultimately denatures the profound reality of this particular image from the Holocaust.⁶ By his misuse of this image, Malamud has begun to turn Isabella's tattoo into what Baudrillard calls a simulacrum, one which over time may be used in unusual and less than appropriate contexts—often by contemporary Jewish American novelists.⁷

In the years after the publication of "The Lady of the Lake," Malamud was not entirely oblivious to the dissolution of Holocaust imagery. In fact, his second attempt at writing a Holocaust fiction might be read as a conscious effort at making up for his first unmasking and denaturing of Holocaust imagery. We should thus understand Malamud's writing "The German Refugee" as an attempt to turn back the clock on language's power to represent—an effort which ultimately fails, but which might serve as a warning to future generations of writers attempting to represent the Holocaust in their fiction.

REVISED WITNESSING: A SECOND ATTEMPT

This shift in Malamud's perspective on writing about the Holocaust might best be viewed in his shift from a limited omniscient third-person narrator, and the relative assurance of such a narrative voice in "The Lady of the Lake," to the halting and uncertain voice of a first-person limited consciousness of an unsophisticated American narrator, Martin Goldberg, in "The German Refugee." Goldberg begins the story as an older man looking back on his youthful experiences. As a young college student in the summer of 1939, he worked as an English tutor for intellectual German refugees. He tells the story of his friendship with one such refugee, the critic Oskar Gassner who has fled Germany in the aftermath of Kristallnacht. Once resettled in New York City, Gassner has been hired as a college lecturer, and by summer's end he must prepare, in English, a speech on Walt Whitman's poetry. Gassner is in desperate fear of his heavy German accent, and Goldberg, a novice in the ways of suffering, a quester in need of understanding to go with his American exuberance, has a long and hot sum-