

A Talk with Bernard Malamud

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I was fortunate to meet Mr. Malamud and have this interview after he read my article, "Bernard Malamud's Renewal of the Human Spirit," which deals with three of his seven novels, *The Assistant* and *A New Life* and *Dubin's Lives*. All of these novels are written with his own definition of art, on the basic theme of self-transcendence, exploring the idea of suffering, and with deft use of irony. The article, which will be published in the annual journal of American Studies Association of Korea, examines the fact that the heroes in his novels have the belief that their life can renew itself and yearn for a better life, even though they get extremely caught up in isolation and suffer deep frustration. I sent the article to Mr. Malamud who was a 1981~1982 fellow of Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences, Palo Alto, California. On February 2, 1982, I interviewed him at his office which overlooks Stanford University. He had many enlightening comments about art, suffering, self-transcendence, morality, democracy, freedom, love, Zen Buddhism, the image of a bird in his novels, the technique of foreshadowing, and translations. He is the author of seven novels and three collections of short stories: *The Natural*(1952) *The Assistant*(1957), *A New Life*(1961), *The Fixer*(1966), *Pictures of Fidelman: An Exhibition*(1969), *The Tenants*(1971), *Dubin's Lives*(1979), *The Magic Barrel*(1958), *Idiots First*(1963), and *Rembrandt's Hat*(1973).

Q: In an interview with Daniel Stern, you made the following definition of art: "It [art] tends toward morality. It values life. Even when it doesn't it tends to. My former colleague, Stanley Edgar Hyman, used to say that even the act of creating a form is a moral act. That leaves out something, but I understand and like what he was driving at. It's close to Frost's definition of a poem as 'a momentary stay against confusion.' Morality begins with an awareness of the sanctity of one's life, hence the lives of others—even Hitler's to begin with—the sheer privilege of being,

in this miraculous cosmos, and trying to figure out why. Art, in essence, celebrates life and gives us our measure." Do you still believe in the definition?

A: I can say with ease that I do; that I feel that the key is in being permitted to live, being permitted to experience, being permitted to learn and to know. And I feel that this is the essence of the sheer enjoyment of life. And I feel that art teaches the same values. Art teaches that life is significant and can be learned from.

Q: How and when did you conceive the definition? Has your view of art changed at different times?

A: I don't remember when I conceived the definition, I would say at a certain point it was there, and it came as a result of thinking about art, and thinking about what I was doing and trying to understand what I was doing. My view of art has changed only in the sense that it has grown. It has been pretty much the same except that it has developed in its ideas, developed in its meaning.

Q: Please explain more in detail the reason why you strongly emphasize the necessity and importance of art in life. Does art change the world? If there were no art, would our political or economic lives be different?

A: Well, that's a very difficult question that you're asking and a good question too. The importance of art in life. It seems to me that there are some people who simply have no concept of the value of their lives. And one of the great and beautiful things about art is that it does teach you what the value of life and living is; what the value of another human being is; what the value of art itself is; what the value of the imagination is. I don't know that art changes the world in any way that can be very quickly discerned, but it seems to me that very slowly and in unseen ways, it changes the world only in so far as it changes the human being and ultimately art has to have that power. Those who are blind to art, of course, are not changed by it, but those who become aware of art must be changed in some way. I imagine if there were no art, that not only our political or economic, but also our psychological, philosophical and any other kind of life we had, indeed, would be different. It would be diminished.

Q: I personally feel that suffering is the only way to solve many difficult problems

with which we are confronted. I consider you a pioneer writer in exploring the significance of suffering as a mode of existence. Why have you taken a deep interest in suffering? Does this interest reflect your cultural or religious background? Have American writers been interested in this idea?

A: Again, a difficult question. I don't personally feel that suffering is the only way to solve many difficult problems. I would hate to have a mode of suffering imposed on people as an education. Obviously, one has to have a talent for suffering. It's nothing that comes to you without some awareness. I'm not talking about just being the victim of brute accident; I'm talking about getting something out of your experience. In *The Assistant* I use it almost unconsciously as something that someone has to learn from. In other words, if you go through an experience, the worst thing that can happen to you is not to understand it, not to react to it, not to feel for it. If the experience is as intense as suffering, then it's wasted on the human being if he doesn't get something out of it that causes him to reflect upon his values and to reflect upon the significance of his life. And I imagine there are various reactions to suffering. As I said, there are some people who may suffer and suffer again the same way when they suffer the second or third time; and there are some people who simply become aware of lacks and losses in themselves and the fact that they could have done their living a little bit better had they tried or had been aware. And to them, once suffering educates them, obviously, they have gained something that they didn't have before. I'm not for suffering. I wish there weren't as much as there is in the world. I don't look at it as a mode of education. But I do feel that if the nature of life is to produce as much suffering as it does, then it should be the nature of the human being to learn from his experiences and to make something better of his life.

Q: It is said that the central theme of your novels is self-transcendence. I personally think it is very difficult to define self-transcendence clearly. However, may I conclude that the way of achieving self-transcendence which is represented in your novels consists in winning freedom in and from the self? Why is that desirable or necessary? Are selfishness and self-interest the same? Is selflessness always good?

A: Well, I would say that, indeed, it is difficult to define self-transcendence clearly

if that's what I'm saying. I'm not so sure that I like the expression self-transcendence. I like what might be called a sense of growth, a sense of, if you will, escape from the lowest levels of selfishness into a kind of generosity of spirit that makes one aware of the needs and the interests of other human beings, and perhaps even incites one to be of help to other human beings. Now, I realize that is not easily come by and it may even sound a little bit over-idealistic, but obviously there are people who are able to keep their own interests in decent proportion and who do not intrude with selfishness, or intrude so much, I should say, with their own self-interest. Now, it's true that in my novels what I'm talking about is the whole ideal of winning freedom for the self. It seems to me that the question of why this is desirable or necessary is obvious, that the less trammelled self you have, the stronger self you have, the more effective it will tend to be. Now, I'm a little surprised by this question: is selflessness always good? I don't quite know what you mean by that. What do you mean by that: is selflessness always good?

What I mean by selflessness is always good, first of all, when we think of others as the basis of our existence.

If it's thinking of others, it's obviously good. One dislikes being preachy about these things and once you begin to assert, what should I say, the thematic value of a book, you tend to be lecturing, tend to be preaching about a mode of behavior which is in a sense derived from the fiction. I like to think of it as part of the art and not something that has been extrapolated from the art, if you know what I mean. So I'm not entirely comfortable talking this particular way, but I have no objections to what you get out of the books.

Q: You have defined morality as "a way of giving value to other lives through assuring human rights," and have said that the "basis of morality is recognizing one another's needs and cooperating." Are morals only about how we treat others in life? Should this be our main concern?

A: Well, I have more or less answered this question in relation to the first. You remember I said when I was being interviewed by Stern that morality begins with an awareness of the sanctity of one's life, hence the lives of others, and I still stand by that. I don't think you can have morals without other human beings. So there

must be something about your relationship to others. I don't know whether it should be the main concern in life. I suppose the main concern is to stay alive, but obviously one of the very strong concerns of life is to help other people stay alive.

Q: In *A New Life* you contended that democracy "owes its existence to the liberal arts." Please explain this contention in more detail.

A: The liberal arts in the humanities, dealing with what is humane and what is human, and so far as democracy is concerned, of course, you deal with what is humane and human in terms of society, and that kind of society that best expresses the humane and human ideal is, to my mind, the democratic society as it best represents itself. Democratic societies can fail in their own way too. But I'm talking about democracy at its best, indeed, is very much concerned with the humane and human.

Q: You have also asserted that "the purpose of freedom is to create it for others," and that freedom "favors love." I wish to know more about your sense of the meaning and function of freedom. How do these ideas relate to Yakov Bok? Has he learned about freedom and responsibility? Is he moral?

A: I see freedom, obviously, as something that is within the self, or has to be achieved within the self and that freedom which has to be achieved in social terms within the society. When I speak of freedom favoring love, I feel that the condition of love favors the self, obviously, and it also favors relationships, and this is what I mean by that. It seems to me that the meaning and function of freedom in the terms of which I've just described it is more or less obvious. Now Yakov Bok has a lot to learn and begins to learn it in the present experience when he reflects a good deal on the world he lives in his suffering, his past life, and in that way, comes to terms ultimately with the kind of self that he has been prior to the time that he is imprisoned. He is not consciously moral, but like many men, including Morris Bober he tends to live morally because he has been in a sense educated morally. Not all people are and not all people have to be preached to be educated morally. This is a way of seeing life with generosity and the feeling of love for others, and a sense that one is not the only person alive and that there are needs for others, obviously, that must be fulfilled. I think he is one person who, through his suffering, it seems

to me, becomes a larger person.

Q: In "The Magic Barrel" you said about love, "Love should be a byproduct of living and worship rather than its own end." And in *The Assistant* you mentioned that loving "should come with love." Please explain your concept of love more concretely.

A: I noticed that what you're doing in this particular quotation, that love should be a byproduct, is more or less putting a sentence out of context from one of the short stories. I think, yes, it is "The Magic Barrel" and that doesn't necessarily represent my point of view. I simply have to say that at the beginning, otherwise anything that one of my characters says becomes a point of view of mine. It isn't. I'm merely expressing, I think it's Leo in the story who says it, to the marriage-broker and then goes on to say more. Now, loving should come with love, this too is something in the fiction itself and it's nothing that I want to preach about or comment on in any particular way.

Q: It seems to me that you have a deep interest in Zen Buddhism. J. D. Salinger is also much interested in it. Why? Because it is similar to Judaism? Are you interested in spiritual feelings or ideas, or in some specific ideas about God and theology?

A: Basically, I don't have the deepest interest in Zen Buddhism. I needed it in *Dubin's Lives*; I read up on it; and I learned about it, and was able, I think, to use it. On the other hand, I am interested in ideas about God and theology and however these ideas are expressed interests me, and therefore I am interested to that extent in Zen Buddhism.

Q: I personally feel that the concepts of morality and freedom examined in your novels tend to express almost the same idea: that other people should be recognized and respected. This similarity of concepts is also to be found in other contemporary American novelists. Why is this consensus established? Is the idea of mutual respect compatible with capitalism? Does the idea get lost in a multi-ethnic, multi-racial society?

A: I imagine that the similarities in concepts occur because many of us read the same things and have been educated in the democratic way. I think people like Bellow and, in his way, Mailer, and Updike, even though they have a difference in

political thinking, still are very much alive to an understanding of the important values, as one would say, these things we are talking about—morality and freedom and all that sort of thing. It becomes established because it is there for you to find, and if you find it, it is valuable to you. As for mutual respect compatible with capitalism, whoever thinks of it in terms of capitalism? This is a mode of being and one *is*; he doesn't try to figure out whether capitalism has anything to do with it or interferes with mutual respect in any way. I mean one tolerates capitalism, and capitalism is no great idea of democracy or of an awareness of mode of living. I suppose the idea does manage at times to get lost when you say a multi-racial society, you don't say a racial society. Various people come to ideas with more fullness and some people come to ideas with less fullness; and some come, obviously, with more comprehension and others with less. I don't think it's the ethnic and racial element that does it; it's the quality of the human being to respond to certain important aspects of human life.

Q: You published your first novel, *The Natural*, in 1952, and your most recent novel *Dubin's Lives*, in 1979. For these twenty-seven years many major events in your society have taken place. For example, the Cold War, McCarthyism, the assassination of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the Vietnam War, President Nixon's resignation, and the ERA movement. How have you been influenced by these events in your writing? Which interests you most, which least? Are you very political? Do you consider yourself liberal or conservative, socially? politically?

A: It's very hard to use the elements of the history of a society, no matter how important they are in any given novel; yet, almost all of these events have been touched in either stories or novels. For example, the Cold War, or something like it, is referred to in my short story called "Man on the Draw." McCarthyism rears its ugly head in *A New Life*. I haven't dealt with the assassination of Kennedy or Martin Luther King. But I have dealt in a sense with the Vietnam War, and again two short stories, "Man on the Draw," and "My Son The Murderer," and not with Nixon's resignation but the personality of Nixon in *Dubin's Lives*. I haven't touched the ERA movement yet, but there is hope.

Q: You use frequently the image of a bird in your novels. Why? Are there other

avored images or symbols or motifs? Do these change in type or in meaning over the years?

A: Well, birds to me I suppose are symbols of freedom. So far as favored images are concerned, that I leave to you to find in my work. I'm sure that there are others. I'm sure that symbols change as well as grow, in the sense that they do grow and there must be, what shall I say, the collection of symbols throughout the years as one becomes aware of phenomena which he then turns in to metaphoric use.

Q: It seems to me that you make a deft use of the technique of foreshadowing. Why do you like this technique so much? Is this just a traditional technique of narrative or a special way or perspective of viewing life?

A: I think I do like foreshadowing; it's a way of creating drama before the fact, and I remember, I think I became aware of foreshadowing for the first time when I was a student studying the plays of Shakespeare. The concept of foreshadowing, as I said, seem to excite me as a mode of creating a drama before a drama. And I'm afraid I have since then been foreshadowing.

Q: Has the function or the form of humor changed in your work? Do you see life as essentially comic or tragic? Or both, or neither?

A: I think humor exists in my work and that is the main thing. Obviously, humor is part of life; humor has to be there. I would be very, very unhappy if I could not see the comic elements that exist in life and in fiction. So let's say that I'm on the watch, on the look for comedy and I will haul it in by both ears whenever I can.

Q: Which do you think is the best one of your novels? Why did you write more short fiction at one time? Did you find larger, more complex subjects required writing novels instead?

A: I think I write what I feel like writing. And if I feel like writing short stories, then I write them; and if I feel like writing novels, I write them. I don't have a best novel, even though I'm aware of the fact that there are people who seem to like one over the other. I can't join that little enterprise. I hope to be able to write some more short stories in the near future now that I've finished my latest novel.

Okay?

Q: Are you writing another novel? Do you see your writing moving in new directions? Are your interests changing?

A: I have just completed another novel which I call *God's Grace*. I think when you read this you will see that my interests have moved, let's say, in an unanticipated direction. I hope my interests are changing; I hope they've become more varied and more interesting as I go along. Obviously, from these interests one takes the source of whatever book or story he happens to be working on.

Q: Do you have any good advice for foreign students who are going to read your novels?

A: My only advice is that they read the novels carefully and if they don't understand them the first time, it pays to read them a second time. And also, I hope they enjoy them.

Q: Some of your novels have been translated into other languages. Do you know anything about the adequacy or aesthetic success of these translations, and do you think it is possible for a work of fiction to be translated with reasonable fidelity to the original meanings of the writer?

A: I've looked into some of the novels, some of the translations of languages I can more or less read. And sometimes I've been very happily pleased and sometimes I've been dismayed by translations that are not reasonably faithful to the original meanings of the book. I'm absolutely certain that there are gifted translators who can do a good deal of justice to any given book in any given language. The main part or the main thing is to have the good luck to get such a translator.