low G-d's commandment by strangling Isaac, the angel called to him, "Do not lay your hands on the lad!" (200) And so Isaac's life was spared.

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The Ordeal of Love: Gender and Difference in Malamud's Fiction

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When Bernard Malamud died I thought, among other sad things, that he would not have wanted *God's Grace* to have been his last book. This novel was a virtual parable for the failure of all human striving. Like Dickens' *Hard Times*, *God's Grace* seemed to write especially large the impossibility of collective human wellbeing. Remembering Malamud's earlier works – the promise implicit in Frank Alpine's painful and inspiring embrace of the law, the hopefulness of Seymour Levin's determination to commit himself to life "because [he] can" – I thought how sad it was that the sacrifice of Calvin Cohn and the regression to bestiality of his pupils should become Malamud's last word on the subject.

But the darkness of *God's Grace* is implicit in the earlier works. If you look only at the theme of love in four of his major novels: *The Assistant*, *A New Life*, *Dubin's Lives*, and *God's Grace*, you can watch the shadows gathering. As Malamud suspected, the problem that frustrates the collective effort at civilization frustrates as well the efforts of individuals to love. In both contexts the issue Malamud's protagonists can never resolve is the issue of difference.

Several contemporary theorists believe that the problems we have with difference are rooted in the process of differentia-

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דזשאַנעט באָרסטין האַלט, אַז דער פּעסימיסטישער טאָן פֿון מאַלאַמודס לעצט בוך God's Grace (גאָטס גענאָד) איז צו דערקענען נאָך אין מאַלאַמודס ערשטע ראָמאַנען. די שטרויכלונגען וואָס האָלטן אָפּ דאָס ציוויליזירונג פֿון דער מענטשהײַט לאָזן זיך אויך דערקענען אין מענטשלעכע ליבעס־באַמיונגען און אין די שוועריקײַטן פֿון איין קולטור אויסצוקומען מיט אַנדערע און שלום צו מאַכן מיטן מאָדערנעם פּלוראַליזם.

tion: a "psychoanalytic term for the process by which children learn that they are not coextensive with the world (Eisenstein xx). When we learn to see ourselves as distinct from others we are differentiating, performing what Nancy Chodorow called an "early task of infantile development" (5). Like other such tasks, this one can lead to different conclusions. If we complete it successfully we learn to recognize other people as subjects who are both like and unlike ourselves. We can even learn to appreciate them apart from our own needs. But there are gender issues buried – like trip wires – in this process. And one of them accounts for the trouble Malamud's protagonists have with difference. Because in our culture women mother, the process of differentiation is not identical for male and female children. All infants, as we know, first identify and bond with their mothers. And that first bond is never forgotten. Thus, built into the core of male gender identity, theorists believe, "is an early, nonverbal, unconscious, almost somatic sense of primary oneness with the mother, an underlying sense of femaleness that continually, usually unnoticeably, but sometimes insistently challenges and undermines the sense of maleness . . . ." As a result, "learning what it is to be masculine comes to mean learning to be not-feminine, or not-womanly" (Chodorow 12). This emphasis on the difference between oneself and others makes separation and distance crucial elements of male identity. Autonomy and independence become essential ingredients of maleness.

This early, negative understanding of oneself can make the process of differentiation problematical for men (16). And the effects can be sobering. In Chodorow's view, male differentiation has become intertwined with and has helped to produce the general cultural notion "that individualism, separateness, and distance from others are desirable and requisite to autonomy and human fulfillment" (16). Another theorist emphasizes the personal effects. If, as Jessica Benjamin observed, the "aspect of differentiation which involves discovering the other person's self is reduced to establishing *dis*similarity and difference from her," (44) then "selfhood" gets "defined negatively as separateness" from whatever – whoever – is "not me." Bonding with her becomes even more dangerous because if we need to be different, but she is like us, a haunting, buried, almost forgotten memory of being-one-with-her nibbles harder at the edges of our hard won sense of difference from her. Within the boundaries we set between her and ourselves we can remain separate and autonomous: characteristics that have been historically gendered as male. But the cost of sustaining identity in such circumstances, as Malamud's male protagonists demonstrate again and again, is significant. These circumstances construct the problem of difference in Malamud's novels. They turn love into an ordeal for individual men, and they develop for mankind the collective social, political, and moral resonances that come to such a sad end in *God's Grace*.

The fictional ramifications of this theoretical problem are everywhere in Malamud's work. For example, when Roy Hobbs appears in Malamud's first novel, *The Natural* (1952), he is literally confronting one consequence of sustaining a separate, autonomous selfhood. As he peers through a window on a moving train, he paws "at the glass . . . no longer surprised at the bright sight of himself . . . peering back in . . ." (3). Roy is "no longer surprised" because he is used to loneliness and isolation. Thus he feels "a splurge of freedom at the view" when his own image dissolves and he can see something other than himself. This first novel announces in its opening paragraph what will become, as many critics have noted, a dominant theme in Malamud's work. Confined by the boundaries his male protagonists build and maintain to be themselves, separate and different from others, the longing for freedom – or what later protagonists will call "change" – becomes paramount.

Love, of course, is what these protagonists hope will change them, will open a window through which another face can be seen, another voice heard, another's hand can reach into the prison they have constructed for themselves. But later protagonists reveal the obstacles that invariably frustrate this hope. For example, their longing to end their isolation by falling in love often expresses itself in voyeurism – an activity that seems to express desire by creating a spurious bond between the voyeur and his object. But only another subject, like oneself, can make reciprocal human bonds. Thus, as male protagonists in these novels spy on the women they want to love, the women become objects in the sense that Laura Mulvey has called "simply the

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scenery onto which men project their narcissistic fantasies" (13). The habit of voyeurism persists, as Chiara Briganti observed, in several of Malamud's later novels. In *The Assistant* (1957), for example, Frank Alpine – ironizing his own name – climbs nothing more dignified than an air shaft to spy on his beloved, Helen Bober, undressing in her bathroom. Appraising her young and lovely body, Frank suddenly recognizes that his gaze is transforming her "into a thing only of his seeing, her eyes reflecting his sins, rotten past, spoiled ideals;" as he looks at her she becomes, like Roy's train window, a mirror of his own feelings about himself: "a mocking smile on her lips, her eyes filled with scorn, pitiless" (73). Because she is merely a canvas for his projections, this woman can be erotic object at one moment and stern judge the next. Either way, his look, as he knows, forces her "out of reach." As he projects his own feelings onto her, he obscures the threatening sense of her as a subject like himself. But he also forfeits the possibility that, as a subject, she could learn to know him and return his love.

Thus Malamud's second novel probes the problem of difference in two ways. It reveals voyeurism as the logical outgrowth of Frank's self-constructed loneliness. It also demonstrates the way in which voyeurism frustrates the possibility of mutual love. The projective power of this voyeur's gaze does even more than force his supposed love object "out of reach" by denying her subjective likeness to him. Ann Kaplan has noticed that the voyeur's gaze is usually "linked with disparagement" – a disparagement that has a "sadistic side, and is involved with pleasure through control or domination" (31). When Barbara Koenig Quart counted the ways in which Malamud's protagonists disparage their lovers, she suspected that the pain which lies under their excessively critical vision probably "has its roots in a deeper place than adult love would seem likely to get at" (148). Indeed, contemporary theorists trace habitual disparagement of women partly to defenses that men erect against the anxiety produced by gender difference (Mulvey 161, quoting Jane Gallop). Powerfully attractive, yet also powerfully threatening to a male sense of self that is always barricaded against memories of the earliest beloved, women in Malamud's fiction are usually objectified and disparaged in one way or another.

Frank's rape of his beloved Helen Bober in *The Assistant*, however, suggests that Malamud saw in the power of the voyeur to distance and objectify an other, the likelihood of far more violent, aggressive, sadistic behavior.

Voyeurism becomes an issue also in *A New Life* (1961). But this novel makes even more explicit its function as one piece of a more complex strategy to protect the mother-haunted male protagonist from his own longing to embrace difference. In the wake of what Chodorow called the "early, nonverbal, unconscious, almost somatic sense of primary oneness with the mother" (12) that may always both attract and threaten male gender identity, this novel introduces the allure of the mothering woman who is, as mothers often are, already married to another man. Levin's perceptions of and defenses against her foreshadow his ultimate inability either to love or to separate from her. She enters Levin's life not only as the wife of another man, but also as a mother of children. Levin identifies on one hand with the father of those children: when he hears the child, Erik, wake at night and call "papa," he tries to respond to the call. But he also identifies with the children themselves: when he falls back to sleep he feels – or imagines – that Pauline is covering him, like one of her own children, with a second blanket (26). She mothers him even more directly when she tends his illness (155). And when they first make love, like a mother responding to the needs of a child, she instinctively accommodates herself to his rhythm. She looks to him "like someone he never expected to see again" – an inexplicable impression until one remembers that his own mother is dead. Again, when her body arouses in him a "renewed momentary sadness, as if he had come too late to the right place, familiar situation of his dreams," (183) he reminds us that, to a child, the mother's body is always already committed to an earlier lover.

James Mellard has taken a close, Lacanian look at Oedipal implications in *Dubin's Lives*. Traces of the Oedipal drama, however, are persistent in Malamud's work. They show themselves again and again in protagonists who both love and are repelled by motherly women. In *The Natural*, for example, Roy is both turned on and turned off by a woman who is not only a mother but a grandmother. He fears union with her despite her power-

ful appeal to him – a fear that some theorists associate with the "merging or loss of boundaries" (Benjamin 50) that comes with adult love but is freighted with old memories of infant/mother bonding. Associated in the far past with merging and boundarylessness nurturing, womanly love especially threatens an identity built upon separation from the mother and the powerful bond she represents. Thus Malamud's protagonists seem to yearn toward what they fear most. As they reach out toward the love of good women, they must simultaneously defend themselves against it.

Levin in *A New Life* (1961) for example, like Roy, defends himself vigorously against the attraction the motherly Pauline possesses for him. He defends partly by disparagement: her nose is too long; her feet too big; her breasts too flat. His attitude toward their first sexual union, moreover, is peculiarly exploitative – as though the powerful romantic element in their woodland tryst were as threatening as Pauline's nurturing qualities to the boundaries around his sense of self. As they make love, he preens himself, conscious throughout "of the marvel of it – in the open forest, nothing less, what triumph!" (185). Afterward, he congratulates himself, turning her into a trophy as he celebrates "his performance in the open – his first married woman . . . ." (189). Later still, he neutralizes her appeal by making her both unknown "other" and potential "enemy": what an "extraordinary thing to have been in a woman and not know her" he thinks; "could he trust her? What did she want from him . . . ? Was there, perhaps, some design in her choice of him . . . ?" Whether he is congratulating himself on his "triumph," celebrating his "performance," or questioning her motives for having given herself to him, he is in every case transforming her into an object. She is the means to his triumph; the prize for his performance, and finally the target of his suspicions. Her subjectivity disappears behind the plentiful projections she absorbs.

Levin moves briefly through a moment of romantic love, forced into it by his body's own rebellion against the emotional defenses he has tried to sustain. Deciding to love, he loves. And presto: she – the object of that love – becomes lovely to him. Not surprisingly, the heat of this passion transforms Levin, like Frank Alpine, into a voyeur whose objectifying gaze is his best

defense. After he has accomplished the destruction of his love for her (304), however, he realizes that he has also buried his own emotional vitality (319). These male protagonists experience love as ordeal because they long to embrace difference. But they can't perceive it without objectifying and disparaging it, and they can't embrace it without jeopardizing their fragile sense of themselves.

William Dubin lives in a similarly fragile box of self, defended on all sides against difference. We sense his plight at the outset, when Dubin calls life "a balancing act . . . a lonely business" (3). For this protagonist, alienated from his kind like his predecessors, all relationships require careful balance lest he lose his position at their center. For example, once he outgrows the romantic belief that nature extends *him*, brings *him* to a higher pitch of consciousness, brings forth "*his* best self" (10), he keeps his "distance even when nature hallooed" (9). He is unable, like his wife, Kitty, to see a flower "whole" (9) because he resists its seductiveness by dissecting and naming its parts. He may long, like Thoreau, to make nature his bride, but his fear turns to scorn for what is different: other than and dangerously uncentered in himself.

His perception of women suffers a similar impediment. Balanced between praise, blame, and opportunism, for example, his first impression of young Fanny registers her sexual appeal and accessibility – but also the "few darkish blond hairs on her chin" (3). He distances Kitty, too, in this way, noting beside her physical attractions her psychological quirks. As others have noted, Dubin's misinterpretation of the strange dance Kitty performs after a bee flies into her shirt suggests the narrow range within which his awareness of her operates. Because what is different is largely opaque to him, held always at arm's length, all his relationships are peculiarly self-conscious. He suffers, in fact, from what he calls the "soiled awareness" of "one's essential aloneness: the self's separate closed, self-conscious subjectivity" (40). Even his children have become for him primarily reflectors of himself; thinking of them, he realizes "you could never recover the clear sight of yourself in their eyes" (40). His characteristic substitution of impersonal pronouns "one" and "you" for more personal references to himself suggest that,

like Sy Levin after he has destroyed his love for motherly Pauline, Dubin's capacity to relate even to himself is sadly diminished by his lifelong struggle to defend himself against difference.

Metaphors of economy that highlight his need to turn all relationships to his own advantage dominate his thought. Thinking about the "gains over losses in marriage, he felt he had honed his character" on Kitty's (17). Describing marriage to Fanny, he says: "In the best of marriages you give what you can and get back as much or more. With the right people it's a decent enterprise. It gives pleasure" (201). He strikes a similar balance with the natural world, thinking as he and Fanny make love in a spring meadow: "This evens it . . . for the cruel winter" (208). Even love itself, in Dubin's lexicon, appears to be governed by economic principles: "in truth," he tells his daughter, "the feeling of love . . . was not boundless . . . . If you loved someone with deepening passion the love of others was effectively reduced, perhaps even paid for the passion. No, love was not boundless . . . . You pour love out for a single self: in theory, no; but in practice other selves get less" (278).

William Dubin spies on and disparages both his wife and his lover. He does not fully satisfy either of them. He creates of his intimate relationships a kind of balancing act in which each beloved woman satisfies a different kind of need for William Dubin. And he uses each woman to protect him from full union with the other. Thus he takes his place among the protagonists who cannot love because they can neither honor nor embrace difference. Like Roy Hobbs, Dubin knows that circles "got you nowhere but back to the place you were to begin with" (153). But as he runs from Kitty to Fanny and back again, Dubin remains entrapped within the boundaries of the closed system he has created to protect him from difference and to gratify the sexual, professional, and moral needs that sustain his vulnerable sense of self.

God's Grace (1982) places Calvin Cohn beyond the enclosure of other protagonists' customary defenses, watches him attempt to love in a world without women, and records the consequences. Chief among them is the disappearance in this protagonist of voyeurism and hostile disparagement of those who are different

from himself. Instead, however, Cohn deals with difference by trying to colonize it. Hostile to Buz's Christian commitments, Cohn tries to turn the chimp into a Jew. Forgetful that each species lives by its own imperatives, he devotes himself to the task of transforming animals into a "functioning social unit . . ." by "civilizing" them, bringing them to a "higher order of behavior" – more like his own (237). The arrogance of his desire comes clearest when he remembers that man has already proven himself "insufficient": in "his relations to other men," Cohn confesses, "he loves only finger-deep . . . . Talks and talks but the real thing goes only finger-deep" (133). Like an illustration of his own point here, Cohn also talks and talks but cannot love.

He knows desire and affection. But they lead him even further into the self appointed work of colonization. Having awakened in a young female chimp, Mary Madeline, the desire to please him, to be like him, Cohn convinces himself that he can use her affection and gratify his own by copulating with her to speed up evolutionary development. But first, he must clothe her – mask from himself and others the profound, essential difference between them by costuming her as a human woman. The arrogance of this act is highlighted by Buz, who reminds Cohn that this female creature is one of "*his* kind, not Cohn's" (157). Another chimp complains that Cohn has corrupted her natural impulses and turned her away from her own kind by his teaching: "'Your stupid schooltree has made her too proud to dip her butt for friends,'" (153) Esau points out. But it is Cohn's pride, not Mary Madeline's, that does the most damage, for he convinces himself that he is entitled by his superior genetic structure to appropriate for his own highly questionable uses the only eligible female creature on the island.

Cohn's tendency to colonize difference because he can love no more than "finger deep" appears not only in his sexual proprietorship but also in the way he conceives "strangers." Attempting to curb the chimps' hostile responses to other animals, he assures Buz that God makes strangers in order "to see what we might do about it. What you do right improves you. That's the kind of conditions the Lord has imposed on us" (182). Unable to perceive the "other" as its own center of self, Cohn can see only the uses of others for the improvement of the self.

He knows that "man destroyed himself by his selfishness and indifference to those who were different from, or differed with him. He scorned himself to death" (199). Knowing that, however, seems not to affect his own response to difference.

Saddest of all for an English teacher to contemplate: the very texts from which Cohn teaches bracket metaphorically the characteristic limits of his power to embrace what is other than himself. He is caught between Abraham and Isaac on one hand and Romeo and Juliet on the other. He cannot see beyond Abraham's willingness to sacrifice another to his own conception of what God desires, and the two romantic lovers whose mutually destructive union obliterates their differences. Within these brackets – made ready for his use by the entire culture that constructed him before it destroyed itself – Calvin Cohn struggles within the prison of his own vulnerabilities, fears, and conceits, like all of Malamud's earlier protagonists, to change a familiar scenario. But the civilization he creates can only mirror the flaws of its creator. Like Calvin Cohn, the creatures fail to recognize others as subjects. They destroy him and the fragile culture in which they must coexist with other creatures because they simply cannot love what is both different from and somewhat like themselves.

Kaja Silverman has taught us that even though a "male subject's identification with power and privilege is threatened from many directions," (47) the "dominant fiction" of our culture "calls upon the male subject to see himself . . . only through the mediation of images of an unimpaired masculinity" (42). Malamud's work appears to respond to that call by insisting that what we think of as "unimpaired masculinity" may be both mythical and problematical. As we try to make it real, we discover that – like all gender designations – it carries certain disadvantages to both individuals and human kind. No other contemporary writer has seen more deeply or more accurately into the particular gendered difficulties with difference that accompany the construction of "masculinity" as he knew it. Thus the romantic ordeals of all his male protagonists image two struggles in which we continue to be engaged. One is the personal struggle to embrace what is separate from and other than ourselves. The other is the continuing struggle of this culture with

what we call pluralism and its endless challenge to accept difference without either disparaging or colonizing it.

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