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## ***JEWISH IDENTITIES WITHIN THE AMERICAN SELVES: ETHNOCENTRIC ANXIETIES IN THREE JEWISH-AMERICAN AUTHORS***

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**Abstract.** *By analyzing three texts (The Lady of the Lake, Portnoy's Complaint, Good as Gold), each of which marks the end of a decade, we follow the changing attitudes and modes of expressing 'Jewishness' as part of the larger construct of the authors' American identity. Malamud's The Lady of the Lake (1959) represents anxiety, shame and escapism as defining signs of ethnic Jewishness. We vicariously experience the self-pity of an author hopelessly trapped within his Jewish identity. Roth's Portnoy's Complaint (1969) depicts a narrator who makes the radical shift from passive self-pity to aggressive denial of his Jewish heritage which nevertheless remains an inextricable part of his identity. The marginalized subject finds himself in a limbo between two worlds – an American and a Jewish one but he belongs to neither. Overall, the novel is an example of 'masculine', as opposed to 'feminine', writing insofar as the protagonist is desperately trying to strike the balance between Jewish orthodox morality, gentile reality and the urges of his own sexuality. In Heller's Good as Gold (1979), the author makes the backward journey from radical dissent to compliance with the ethnic aspect of his identity, thus closing the circle and reaffirming his ineffable 'Jewishness' as part of his broader 'American Identity'.*

To what extent can we claim that ethnicity influences authorial modes of expression? To what degree does belonging to a particular communal group impact Self awareness of writers? And more precisely, is "Jewishness" a starting point, a major theme or, is it just made use of in the works of major Jewish American writers? Are Jewish American authors ethnocentric or not? Is there a change in the ethno-awareness of American writers of Jewish origin in the decades after WWII or not?

In search of these answer, in this presentation we analyze three texts from authors belonging to the fore said group. Why these particular three out of many?

First Malamud was chosen because he is frequently referred to as the "archetypal Jewish American writer" (Cappell 37), though this is due to the fact that he is credited with the literary invention of the so-called "Yinglish", the mixture of Yiddish cadences and wrong word ordering with the English that first-generation Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, that Malamud primarily writes about, used.

Then we discuss Roth, and especially his *Portnoy's Complaint*, because it is argued that this particular text serves a watershed between the old generation Jewish American authors and the new ones. Or as Krasney would have it:

The seminal novel, if you will pardon a bad pun, is *Portnoy's Complaint*. Roth, though connected to Yiddishkeit (mainly through his grandparents, not through his American-born parents), is the writer who easily represents the beginning of a new direction for Jewish writing. His work is the best harbinger of the death of American Jewish writing as we have known it (95).

And finally, we chose Heller as undeniably the most influential and widely acknowledged author of Jewish decent in America. And the text has to be *Good as Gold* for it simply is centered on the "Jewish experience" in America and that makes it suitable for the aims of discussion.

All in all, the three works mark a trend indicating a rapid amalgamation between a marginalized ghetto culture and the so-called mainstream into a new urban literary canon that is purely American in

essence. There are writers of Jewish descent, but their writing is no longer Jewish, it is American in style, in form, in essence. Or as Krasney puts it:

What we *see* today are writers of Jewish descent who were brought up in Jewish suburbs or in Manhattan and Brooklyn, writers who have become assimilated and who have assimilated. They are not at all strikingly dissimilar from Pynchon, Hawkes, Vonnegut, and other urban novelists (95).

Malamud is at his best when it comes to narrating the everyday suburban life of the American Jewish community. However, as Cappell argues, there's very little genuine Jewishness in his prose. His representation of Judaism does not rely on any classical Jewish source but upon Christian iconography instead. "Malamud's Judaism is steeped in an ethos of Christian suffering rather than a conception of messianic Jewish redemption" (Cappell 37) and this is best exemplified when Malamud attempts to deal with particular Jewish themes or historical episodes like the Holocaust.

Ironically, though Malamud claimed himself in many interviews that horrible historical events like the advent of the WWII and the Holocaust convinced him to become a writer, and though these particular historic episodes inhabit much of his writing as context, his direct attempt to deal with the Holocaust turns into a failure. By failure, we mean the inability to write convincingly about the tragedy of the victims of Nazi genocide.

It is one thing to condemn the horrors from a purely humanistic moral stance, yet a totally different thing it is to be able to adequately present the legacy of these horrors.

His first attempt and the text to be discussed here is the story *Lady of the Lake*, which appeared for the first time in his short stories collection *The Magic Barrel* in 1959. The story is simple as a parable and has a moral lesson to teach.

The young America Jew, Henry Levin, goes to Europe in search of adventure and romance. Obviously not being at ease with his origin, he conceals his identity, traveling under the name of Henry Freeman. Thus he thinks he will "free" himself from the "slings and arrows" of anti-Semitism and marginalization. His meeting the beautiful Italian girl, Isabella Del Dongo, is like a dream come true. Not only is she interested in his company but she is also the heir to the European aristocracy. Strangely enough Isabella insists on inquiring if Henry happens to be a Jew to which he anxiously denies his origin. At the end it turns out that his fake "lovely princess" actually is of Jewish origin herself and she rejects Henry's proposal on the basis that she can not possibly marry a gentile for what she most treasures and has suffered for is her Jewish legacy. Thus Levin is punished for the denial of his communal heritage and his ambition to conceal his identity and forget his true origins.

Malamud, the moralist preacher, is very careful that his reader should not miss the point of the moral lesson. He intentionally re-contextualizes one of the legends of Malory's Arthurian cycle. The reader is forced to make the contrast between King Arthur who is given the Excalibur by the Lady of the Lake and proudly steps into his identity of the new honorable community leader and Levin who through the denial of his identity is humiliated and deprived of honor and community. To make things worse for Levin Malamud has him deny three times his identity thus invoking a parallel between his disgusting act and that of Peter's triple denial of Christ. And the last *coup de grâce* in the roll of Levin's sufferings is the invocation of the horrors of the Holocaust. Malamud uses the image as a final revelation for poor Freeman, who is to be taught that a human is only to be free if he is freed from all his prejudices and fears and reconciles with whom he actually is.

But this is where Malamud goes wrong. And he goes wrong because he misuses the Holocaust imagery. The story ends with the ominous revelation. Following Henry's third and last denial, Isabella slowly unbuttons her bodice:

. . . When she revealed her breasts . . . to his horror he discerned tattooed on the soft and tender flesh a bluish line of distorted numbers. "Buchenwald," Isabella said, "when I was a little girl. The Fascists sent us there. The Nazis did it . . . I can't marry you. We are Jews. My past is meaningful to me. I treasure what I suffered for (44).

And she flees away and the mourning and berated Henry who now deeply regrets his denial symbolically embraces a moonlit cold stone.

No matter how convincing the scene and Isabella herself may seem there is a real problem here. First of all, Isabella's tattooed breast is highly implausible. A quick reference to basic sources for the Studies of Holocaust<sup>1</sup> inform that the practice of systematically tattooing of prisoners in Nazi Germany was limited solely to the Auschwitz concentration camp, and Isabella is a victim from Buchenwald. Secondly, the same sources claim that tattooing prisoner's numbers on women began in the spring of 1943 and by that time the identification tattoos have been made on the left inner forearm or upper arm, not the upper left part of the chest.

And if we can excuse Malamud for not being so well informed for the particularities of Nazi prisoners' treatment we can not easily dismiss his misuse of the tattoo as a Holocaust image. We can not but agree with Cappell who comments that:

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 (44).

Thus, instead of spurring the readers condemnation for Henry's denial of his heritage Malamud not only achieves the opposite effect, but denatures the profound reality of the particular Holocaust image on the way. The result is that the modern reader views Isabella's tattoo as a Baudrillardian simulacrum *par excellence*. And Isabella herself becomes totally unconvincing and fake, just like the fake Titians and Tintoretos in the castle.

So, what kind of Jewish identity is Malamud searching for? What kind of Jewishness is he aware of? He is widely known for his statement that "All men are Jews, though few of them know it". This has been interpreted as Malamud's main theme; the underscoring motif of his typical suffering protagonists. "All the world suffers" we read in the *Assistant*. Hence his suffering characters should be judged on their ability to construct meaning out of the suffering itself. And, of course, the meaning they are supposed to get is "what it means to be a human being". But again, this is a Universal theme for authors around the world. You don't have to be an ardent Dostoyevsky admirer to be aware of it. You can simply go back to Hawthorne and the *Scarlet Letter* and find the same there.

Hence, as Solotaroff suggests, and Cappell agrees, Malamud's Jewishness is a pure image, a useful tool with which to represent moral life that we can apply easily to any other ethnic groups and religious affiliations. And to quote Solotaroff: "Malamud 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). Malamud in an attempt to universalize Jewish experience has created a metaphor out of it and an image out of Jewishness. And as Cappell has it: "..., Malamud has severed ethnicity from religion, hoping to rend it universal and all encompassing" (42).

On that basis, given the multicultural idiosyncrasies of the American literary milieu, we can claim that Malamud's Jewishness does not differ from other cultural ethnic-minority sub-identities, as taking an equal share in constructing the diverse but homogeneous, universal "American Identity".

We skip a decade and come to Roth.

The second example of Jewish-American writing to be reviewed here is Philip Roth's comic masterpiece *Portnoy's Complaint*. From the very beginning the novel starts as a confession of the protagonist-Alexander Portnoy to his psychiatrist-doctor Spielvogel (a German, incidentally). Doctor Spielvogel's diagnosis of Portnoy's predicament is:

A disorder in which strongly-felt ethical and altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings, often of a perverse nature...(278).

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<sup>1</sup> Like: Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

On the face of it, Portnoy's dilemma is the classical case of a son being raised by exacting and uncompromising mother. Throughout the text, the reader is confronted with numerous and sometimes outrageous examples of the educational methods his mother employed during his childhood. One of these traumatic experiences takes place when Portnoy is "six, seven years old" and would not eat his food, at which his mother does not hesitate and threatens him with a knife:

Doctor, why, why oh why oh why oh why does a mother pull a knife on her own son?...how do I know she really wouldn't use it? What am I supposed to do, try bluffing her out, at seven? (288).

Traumatic as this experience is, still, it cannot account for the profound psychological split Portnoy is trying to overcome and get along with his life. There are many other events in his childhood in which he is on the receiving end of some kind of gross injustice. Yet, even the sum total of this, as perceived by the protagonist, abuse, does not explain his later problems. In his eyes, Sophie Portnoy takes "larger than life" dimensions. Her powers and ubiquity are, to put it mildly, awesome:

She was so deeply embedded in my consciousness that for the first year of school I seem to have believed that each of my teachers was my mother in disguise. As soon as the last bell had sounded, I would rush off for home, wondering as I ran if I could possibly make it to our apartment before she had succeeded in transforming herself (279).

Despite her negative treatment in the novel, Sophie Portnoy is important in her son's ethical development, for what she does in the beginning of his childhood and throughout his life is to make Portnoy realize at least a limited idea of good conduct. Sophie's standards range from her fanatic belief that cleanliness is next to godliness to her strict adherence to the Laws of the Talmud. Portnoy's childhood is a minefield of "watch-its" and "be-carefuls", "rules and regulations" that he must not step upon, on pain of drawing nothing less than God's anger. These rules, however, are not his for one very simple reason-he can not and would not be perfect. This is where his Jewishness plays itself out and influences his life. In that respect, Marilyn Waniek suggests that "the dilemma faced by Alexander Portnoy is only partially explained by the dictionary definition attributed to Dr. O. Spielvogel at the beginning of the novel. Spielvogel apparently misinterprets the basis of Portnoy's complaint as Portnoy himself does, tracing it to the bonds obtaining in the mother-child relationship. While Roth plays with the cliché of the Jewish mother in the novel, what emerges as the basis of Portnoy's neurosis is, however, not his mother herself, but the conflict between her standards of righteousness, which Portnoy knows he has never met, and Portnoy's own standards." (Waniek 30).

According to Waniek the conflict we see in the protagonist is the conflict of the marginal individual. This term, coined in 1937 by Everett Stonequist in his book, *The Marginal Man*, is applied to individuals who through migration, marriage, education or another change leave one group without making satisfactory adjustment to another and who find themselves on the margin of each, but members of neither. Such racial or cultural hybrids, says Stonequist, "suffer from a sort of dual personality. Although only in cases in which the conflict is intense and of considerable duration is the personality dangerously oriented around the conflict, most marginal men betray what Stonequist terms ambivalence of attitude and sentiment, which is divided loyalty and ambivalent attitude which explains the fluctuating and contradictory opinions of the marginal man. At one moment he may affirm one point of view; at another he as positively voices an opposite opinion". (44)

The conflict inside Portnoy is the conflict of two completely different sets of values. As Waniek puts it:

Sophie Portnoy's standards are those of the American Jewish Community in the novel, and Portnoy's belief in social virtue is rooted in his mother's teachings. Yet, he believes that his mother-and by extension the American Jewish community-is far from virtuous (Waniek 30).

Such a hypothesis is corroborated by Portnoy's admission: "... living in this predicament, torn by desires that are repugnant to my conscience and a conscience repugnant to my desires..." (369)

In Portnoy's view Jewish morality is hypocritical and false. Its emphasis on being "good" and living by God's Laws is inimical to his own proclivities. He is "an atheist" and "a communist", after all. He famously exclaims in indignation and defiance: "Whose Law? What Law!"(301) This act of rebellion against the Jewish establishment, however, rings hollow since Portnoy, against his better judgment, has somehow internalized his mother's teachings, subconsciously imbibed Jewish morality and made it his own. This is why every time Portnoy does something that has not received the holy sanction of "Jewish Laws", his "conscience" rears on its hind legs, wags its finger in admonition at this profligate son of Solomon and racks him with a debilitating sense of guilt:

Doctor Spielvogel, this is my life, my only life, and I am living it in the middle of a Jewish joke! I am the son in the Jewish joke-only it ain't no joke! Please, who crippled us like this? Who made us so morbid and hysterical and weak?...Doctor, what do you call this weakness I have? Is this the Jewish suffering I used to hear so much about? Is this what has come down to me from the pogroms and the persecution? From the mockery and abuse bestowed by the Goyim over these two thousand lovely years? (302)

His sense of guilt renders him amazed at the simple fact that "there are people who feel in life the ease, the self-assurance, the simple and essential affiliation with what is going on."(326) Unable to deliver himself from guilt, Portnoy takes a plunge in it by exploring his sexuality. In a most detailed and explicit manner Portnoy relives his adolescent masturbations. It is part of Roth's gift that he can somehow make obsessive masturbation and four-letter words funny and therefore ultimately inoffensive. It is no secret that laughter is one of man's best defenses against those things that embarrass and terrorize him. Through the frank and sometimes graphic description of his protagonist's amorous affairs, Philip Roth gives this novel unmistakable gender twist and coloring. Anne Kolodny was the first to broach the idea of a "masculine mode" of writing. In his essay *The Masculine Mode* Peter Schwenger argues that the most obvious point of difference from the feminine mode of writing is that "the men's movement lacks the concrete rallying point of economic discrimination; it must necessarily address itself to the subtler psychological dynamics of the male role. It is here that literature, for several reasons, is likely to be called upon: literature provides experiences which, though artificial may be the common property of millions; it contains insights which, though not systemized, are still valid; it provides words for perceptions which, until named, may not even be recognized.

According to Schwenger we should limit the masculine mode to writers, who rather than neutralize, contradict, or simply ignore their male sexuality, take it as their explicit subject. In this way we may consider with more certainty and subtlety the relation of this conscious preoccupation and the words used to describe it. (Schwenger 627)

The hilarious accounts of Portnoy's sexual exploits put Roth in a league of his own. By exploring his sexuality to ever greater lengths, Portnoy takes his own personal revenge on the multitude of rules, whose only aim, it appears to him is to mould him in a respectable Jewish man who is a credit, both, to his parents and the Jewish community. The Monkey, his sensational and scandalous mistress is somehow at odds with his duties as "Commissioner of Human Opportunity for the city of New York". The public attitude is constantly on his mind:

When will it end? Only why should it end! To please a father and mother? To conform to the norm? Why on earth should I be so defensive about being what was honorably called some years ago, a bachelor? So what's the crime? Sexual freedom? Why should I bend to the bourgeoisie? Do I ask them to bend to me? (348)

It is only too ironic, then, that The Monkey, his refuge from middle-class Jewish morality, ended up expecting from him to be a middle-class and respectable Jew. Approaching her 30's, she wants to be a respectable lady. All that Portnoy has to do is marry her. Something he would rather not. Her polite

request sets him running for dear life, leaving her in their Athens hotel room, threatening suicide by jumping out of the balcony:

Running away! In flight, escaping again-and from what? From someone else who would have me a saint! Which I ain't! And do not want or intend to be! No, any guilt on my part is comical! (451)

Indeed. We are hard put to decide which word best describes Portnoy's predicament-tragedy or comedy. It is a condition that can be ascribed not only to the Jewish people-this duality of the personality-"a divided self"-duality noticed by more than one ethnic writer. W.E.B. DuBois writes of the Negro: "Ever feels his two-ness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled Strivings" (17).

Similarly, Portnoy is torn between two tugging forces that give him no peace - the Jewish morality he imbibed from his mother working against his natural desires and views. The Jew in him stands against The American. Portnoy is keenly aware that whereas America was peace, security and a meal on the table for his parents, for him it is the glamorous and beckoning world of the shiksies. Self integrity can be achieved only through a reconciliation of the opposing and ever warring Portnoy's identities. Unable to do that he is caught in the vicious circle of schizophrenic existence, doomed to always hate and deny part of his self.

Hence Roth suggests that there is no way out through a denial of and rebellion against his Jewish heritage. Just like Malamud he makes use of "Jewishness", but while the latter uses it as a moral template against which to judge his characters, Roth uses it to demonstrate the psychic disintegration of his protagonist. His primal concern is the anxious, dissolute modern self, unable to cope with the duality of his own identity. We have to wait for Heller and his Bruce Gold for the reconciliation.

In *Good as Gold* Heller presents a postmodern version of the initiation novel with the ironic catch that the hero is nearing his fifties and matures to self-discovery in the backward journey to his boyhood in Brooklyn and his Jewish origins. Though concerned with the American Jewish experience, the ambivalence of the journey

...suggests patterns of behavior and adjustment in the general ethnic and racial minority experience in America. Gold is a man between – capable of reaching toward an identity determined by the values of the dominant culture but divided in his attitudes toward such success, recognizing the achievement of it as death even while compelled to pursue such achievement. (Miller 6)

Gold is the striving aspirant who dreams of wealth, power and authority heading his way towards a nomination in the presidential administration. He sees his meager backgrounds in the suburban Brooklyn as a burden and wants to get rid of it. His own perverted vision of the American dream is associated with the post of a Secretary of State and the marriage to beautiful WASP princess Andrea Conover. Just like a postmodern Gatsby he dreams of the orgiastic future envisioned in a promiscuous life in his promised land – Washington D.C. where he will be credited with the respect of the ruling class and will indulge in pleasures.

As a second generation immigrant Bruce Gold easily succumbs to assimilation by the dominant culture. Unlike his father and his elder brother, Sid, who try to preserve the memories and traditions of their Jewish origins, Gold is easily captivated by the "mainstream" American values and uprooted from his ethnic environment. The process begins when he enrolls in Columbia. His best friend there and a valuable acquaintance for the future is Ralf Newsome, a stupid but well connected student whom Gold has written all his assignments for and who later works for the president. Newsome promises to help Gold with his nomination.

And this is what Gold dreams of:

...to work with Ralf for the President, marry Andrea, share her apartment in Washington, fuck her richer and even more attractive friends, serve on a Presidential Commission on education, and be an overpaid professor of Urban Studies (Heller 147).

This dream of his can be achieved through a compromise of morality and compliance with establishment ethics, through denial of his origins, through escape from his marginalized ethnic status and amalgamation with the mainstream culture. As Miller notices, the narrative structure resembles that of a Morality Play:

...in which the hero, in the face of death, chooses between various representatives of good and evil, [he] vacillates between, on the one hand, the moral death of public success with its power and pleasures and, on the other, the possibility of a personal alternative that he hardly understands (4).

Miller goes on to identify the characters and parallel them with that of such classic Morality plays as *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Everyman* and *Mankind*. Hence Ralf Newsome resembles Bad Angel or Mischief and the Jewish CIA agent, Greenspan, plays is a schematized version of Good Angel or Good Deeds. Greenspan is constantly tormenting Gold, reminding him of his moral obligations and calling him *Shonda* – shame for his family and his race. But at the same time he is always there to help and advise Gold, guiding his way back to maturation through step-by-step awareness of his obligations towards family and ethnicity. Greenspan is the one who can read speak Hebrew in original and the one who knows the prayers for the *minyán* - the wake they have to sit for Gold's death brother Sid, and which is carried out in line with the Judaic religious tradition.

This narrative strategy helps Heller easily develop his moral argument that self-integrity comes with the acceptance not a denial of one's own cultural and ethnic background. Among the rogues gallery of caricature characters of Jewish aspirants we can also categorize the ever-aspiring and ever-complaining neo-conservative Max Lieberman and the ever-taller and ever-paler Harris Rosenblatt. The grotesque Rosenblatt who is a member of the establishment Harvard graduates Club though he has never attended Harvard seems paler and taller, more and more WASPish every time Gold meets him. With him the process of assimilation resembles a physical mimicry. He is so eager to join the elite that his physical appearance is no longer Jewish. He becomes a kind of literary prototype of Michael Jackson.

But it is the former Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, of course, who is the embodiment of the Archetypal minority aspirant. He craves acceptance by the establishment to the point of accepting their values and ways. Gold is infuriated by the hypocrisy and arrogance of the mastermind who sold his brains in the service of American power politics. The engineer and instigator of mass bombardments in East Asia, is able to fall to his knees and join Nixon in his hypocritical prayers.

But the essence of WASPish elite is Pugh Biddle Conover, Andrea's wealthy, senile and disgusting father. He never even attempts at hiding his contempt for all outside his own circle of pseudo-aristocratic establishment friends. And he hates even them. Money and power is what matters and he asserts that with brutality and arrogance.

Ironically however, Conover is the one who directly advises Gold that he should not try to conceal his ethnic identity, since anyway he can pass for what ever he is not. And Gold learns another lesson from the arrogant bully. The ruling class or so called establishment does not discriminate when it comes to hatred towards any ethnic, religious or other minority group. In fact they hate everybody. "Italians too. And Irish Catholics" (265) says Conover, and later on when discussing Gold's candidacy he is revolted with the idea that not only "kikes" are being considered but also "coons, Greeks, dagos, spics and women" (Heller 406). Everyone outside the racist, chauvinistic and misogynistic elite is categorized as the Other.

Gold begins his book about the Jewish experience in America with the confession that he knows nothing about it, simply because he had never thought of himself as Jewish. Everyone in the neighborhood was Jewish and he even has not run into an effective anti-Semite. "I never even realized I was Jewish until I was practically grown up" (Heller 3). Here Heller is echoing Malamud and to make things clear he makes Gold's stepmother Gussie repeat later on in the book Malamud's word he uses as a motto "If you ever forget you are a Jew, a gentile will remind you".

To suit his moral aesthetics Malamud immediately defines the Jewish identity of his suffering protagonists within the realm of the Other as opposed to a dominant assimilating culture. Heller, however, enabling Gold to see himself through the eyes of the Other (Conover) deconstructs Otherness as a concept. Where we are the others there are no others.

The binary opposition I/ the Other remains on the surface, on the level of ethnicity and culture. When it comes to self-awareness and Identity this same opposition is dissolved. Meaning that we construct identity on the basis of our original culture in the same way the others do.

Hence the reconciliation, Gold turns back to his roots and his Coney Island beginnings to regain self-integrity. After Sid's death he takes on the responsibility for the family and Jewish tradition. His symbolic maturation is complete. He is at peace with himself. And the book ends with the optimistic scene of some Jewish boys playing baseball.

As Gold watched, the catcher, a muscular, redheaded youth with freckles and sidelocks and a face as Irish or Scottish or Polish as any Gold had ever laid eyes upon, moved wrathfully toward the pitcher with words Gold for a minute had trouble believing.

“Varf! Shouted the catcher. “Varf it, already! Varf the fucking ball! (Heller 488).

Not only the boy can be of any ethnic background but also the combination of the Yiddish Varf (to throw) with the English obscenity is indicative of Gold's return. He now knows who he is, what his origins and heritage are and how he has to live decently from now on.

Thus Gold is left contemplating on where to begin his book about the Jewish American experience. Actually, this is the book which Heller has just finished.

The three examples of Jewish American writing reveal various attitudes to what it is to be a Jew. Malamud's protagonist denies his ethnicity, Portnoy rebels against its morality, which he views as hypocritical. Gold rediscovers its merits, goes back into the fold, thus making a full circle.

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