

Bernard Malamud: setting his pen to voice

By MICHAEL PETRYNI
Of the Emerald

The modern tradition probably extends from Dickens to Yevtushenko. Its origins probably go to cromagnon man, lie institutionalized in ancient Greece and at its peak, the tradition embodies the whole fraternity of town criers.

For many years in the United States, it was centered on front porches, verandas, and in general stores around cracker barrels, before being transferred to the stage. Mark Twain was its master. Faulkner created Radcliffe—the itinerant salesman of sewing machines and gossip—of the Snopes trilogy to try to catch its spirit. The South probably maintained the tradition for the longest. One thinks of the farmers gathering on Saturday, visitin', they would say. Will Rogers certainly had a large share.

Storytelling. The word seems to dance on a nerve ending. To say it in a flat voice gives it an aura, a mystery similar to Jean Shepard's gasping the simple dream word. "Maine." to say it with exclamation gives it a gusto, an exhilaration similar to an excited fisherman's lie.

Oral tradition

The oral tradition always came first. Its tales and myths seeped into all corners of life, modified and charged upon with each new telling, always changing, always vibrant and alive. Inevitably the writers come along and set it all into printed word, giving the tale a body. There was a tension edge there for the writers too. James Agee, a wordslinger, who would talk with the same rolling, passionate language of his books. Walker Evans recalls the temptation to put a pen in Agee's hand so that he could save it all. Brendan Behan certainly was caught in the web between the traditions. Dylan Thomas, maybe.

James Dickey paid his dues—when asked on the Cavett show why the South had produced so many fine writers, he replied: "I suppose my generation was the last able to sit around and actually hear a story."

To save it all, Evan said, yes, that has its usefulness. To read a book and tremble is to later have a tingle on the ridge of the spine, and welling tear on the edge of the eyelid when you tell about it to a friend. Or to have a lump in the throat, as Stanley Kauffmann once said of Bernard Malamud's book of stories, *Idiot's First*.

There seems to be an increased yearning for that oral tradition, to hear a story. Talk shows are a rather half-hearted expression of that yearning. Hal Holbrook's Mark Twain and James Whitmore's Will Rogers are certainly expressions of that yearning. Poetry reading at the Odyssey, in fact poetry readings anywhere. But on a smaller scale there seems to be something going on in Eugene's bars—Blitz has an idea what's happening—a lot of people are sitting around a lot of tables, talking to each other.

Some of that yearning may have been expressed last Thursday night when a standing room only crowd jammed into PLC 180 to hear Bernard Malamud read two short stories.

The guy next to me whispered to his date: "Big name draws a crowd." But in so saying he excluded himself from such a category. Why was he there?

Granted the tea and crumpet crowd was there. A certain culture status clings to Malamud. But I won't put that down. Culture status is easily diminished by a sigh at a certain voice inflection or the power of a word. Welcome to my web, the storyteller would say, and devour with a human contact.

Malamud is a small, gnomish man with dark-rimmed glasses that seem to barely hook back over his ears. He taught at OSU for a number of years and finished them off with a novel. His voice is flat, nasal and makes one think of a cobbler inquiring what kind of sole you prefer on your shoe.

He explains that he writes stories after completing a novel to see "what else is new, what have I learned? To assess certain meanings that I have lived through."

"I tend to be a fabulist, not a self projector," he says. Inevitably, one wonders. The informal usage of "storyteller," means a prevaricator, pleasantly a liar. So we forgive a fiction writer so that we can get on to another truth.

He says he imagines an "invisible figure" on whom he tenuously hangs his story, his hand describing the figure with the deaf and dumb language for falling rain. The "invisible figure" tickles the mind with an intrigue of an apparition. Of the story's finish, he says, "When it says what it has to, it ends, but the meaning goes on."

"The Letter"

The first story, "The Letter" concerns a man named Newman who goes to visit his father in an institution, an asylum, I guess. Newman sits with his father in the ward for some two and a half hours. Newman brings the old man "one pineapple tart and one strawberry but the old man wouldn't eat them." Newman at one point said "Do you want me to come back next Sunday, or do you want to have next Sunday off?"

"The old man said nothing. Nothing meant yes or it meant no. If you pressed him to say which, he wept."

Hmm . . . The old man can't remember that his wife is dead and when his son tells him, he won't believe "that one." We can pick and choose the lies we will or will not believe.

When Newman leaves, he runs into Teddy, who stands by the gate with a letter in his hand. Teddy was "fifty or more and maybe so was his letter." The envelope was blue and inside were four blank sheets of cream paper. He wants Newman to mail the letter for him, but Newman won't because there is nothing in it. "That's what you say," Teddy says.

Teddy, having fought at Guadalcanal, always asks Newman where Newman fought. "Nowhere yet," he answers.

Newman humors Teddy on the letter, which Teddy still thinks will take three cents to mail. Inflation doesn't affect the insane. Newman asks what kind of letter is it? "Blue with white paper inside of it," Teddy answers.

Newman: "Saying what?"

Teddy: "Shame on you."

Then one Sunday, a tall, lean old man looking about eighty years old and wearing a WW I overseas cap, stood with Teddy at the gate. His name is Ralph. He is Teddy's father. He, too, tries to get Newman to mail Teddy's letter.

Newman is astonished that Ralph is Teddy's father: "Neither of you resemble the other."

"Who do you resemble?" Ralph asks, twisting the question back on Newman, who can't say.

"What war were you in?" Ralph asks.

"None so far."

"We're stuck here because we fought the wars. Teddy at Iwo Jima. I fought in the Marne and in the Argonne Forest. I had both lungs gassed. The wind changed and the Huns were gassed. That's not all that were."

"I'm sorry you were gassed," Newman says.

"Tough turd," Teddy says.

Again the pleas to mail the letter. But no.

"I better be going," Newman said, "or I'll miss my train." The guard let him through the gate and then closed the gate.

Hmm . . .

"Who do you visit here," Ralph yelled to Newman.

"My father."

"What war was he in?"

"The wars of life."

"Has he got walking privileges?"

"No."

"What I mean, is he crazy?"

"Yes."

"So are you," Ralph said. "Why don't you come back in here and stay around with the rest of us."

Each Malamud story seems to hang on the "invisible figure" of human loss, of pain. They ride on ripple of sadness. Spoken, they cause a fidgeting in the crowd, a shifting of position. They seek out the chill of a cold sweat.

"In Retirement"

The second story, "In Retirement," concerns a Dr. Morris, 67, wife dead, daughter in Scotland, just retired and seemingly content with his loneliness. Concern like the animal—old age—sits in his lap. "Where else can I go," he asks himself, "67 is not 80."

In the narrow deep lobby of the building where he lives he sees a woman drop a letter and he picks it up and in curiosity puts it in his pocket.

Reading it, he finds it is a father-to-daughter letter. It is filled with words like "You have slept around long enough . . . easy lay . . . find a husband . . . your life is that of a semi-prostitute . . . men use you . . . 29 is not 16." Her mother appended to the letter: "Your sex life fills me full of fear."

Dr. Morris, a train of thought rubbing by about the girl, finds himself slipping into erotic wishes. He becomes overwhelmed with emotion and the torments of nights of erotic dreams.

He must find out more about the girl. He gets another letter, one from a man friend, which was a bore except for the last line: "Be in bed, wearing white panties, I don't like to waste time." Dr. Morris didn't know who he was more disgusted with—this fool, or himself.

So Dr. Morris begins to make it a habit to watch the girl pick up her mail, watch her put some letter away, embrace others with suppressed excitement.

Finally, thinking more and more about her, he composes his own letter, a doctor's clinical rendering of his own affectionate interest. He composes it in excitement. Rejects the idea of writing the last line . . . "Be in bed, wearing white panties, I don't like to waste time."

He mails it and waits to see her pick it up.

To his horror, she comes down with a man beside her. She reads the letter, the scrawl of his eagerness, and hands it to her companion. Dr. Morris blanches.

Taking the letter back, the girl, with spite, tears it up and throws the pieces in Morris' direction "like a blast of wind-driven snow."

His expectations are crushed in pain. His hope flittered away.

Getting into the elevator at one end of "long, deep lobby," he tells the elevator man: "There's no way for setting old age aside, or death," and rides up 15 floors.

Techniques

Storytelling has its techniques. Hal Holbrook, for instance, using the charm of Mark Twain taking a break from his lecture to go out back to have a cigar when he has been smoking all along. Malamud relies on his words. Keeping his voice understated, he lets his word pack the wallop. He lets the phrases hang in the air, like clouds taking on the shape of ships.

Storytelling is mini-theatre, but closer to the playwright as actor. There is the direct contact between the artist and his audience. Malamud shakes hands with people during a break. They whisper their compliments to him. No doubt, it is instant gratification. A sharing of thought, of feelings, sitting on edge of a tradition.

The last story, "The Silver Crown," had much to do with the lack of faith. The meddling over and the muddling through of human life. A man lets his father die because he does not believe a mystic's charm.

But I am tired of writing so I will let the last story depend on verbal exchange. It is a good story and probably can be better if you find someone who was there and is willing to share it with you. A fine story to tip a beer over.

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