

CHAPTER TWO

THE HUMANISTS

The humanists, by and large, operate within the traditional temporal framework. Their work also reveals social concern. The main difference between their treatment of violence and madness and that of the realists is that these are not presented in the form of historical situations, as they are in the work of the realists, but are internalized through their assimilation to image and rhetoric. One also notices that violence and madness take place mainly against the urban landscape and very often the racial angle is present.

Violence and madness will be examined in the work of these writers under different categories. In the second part of the chapter will be studied imagery in terms of negative imagery of death and destruction and positive imagery where even violent death signifies some form of human triumph.

Malamud, Bellow and Mailer have one thing in common - humanism. Despite the bleak world they present in their books there emerges an unshaken faith in man. As McConnell says of Bellow:

In an age of excess and apocalypse, an age which has in many ways turned the end of the world into its most important product, Bellow remains a resolutely antiapocalyptic novelist, defending the value of the human middle ground when most of us, much of the time, seem to have forgotten that territory's very existence. But the efficiency of his defence of normality is a function, absolutely, of his powerful sense of the impingements of the abnormal, of his ability to imagine, as chillingly as any novelist writing today, the manic horrors of solipsism and nightmare which lurk around every corner, down every street of our artificially daylight cities.¹

All three writers retain a hold on the sense of human destiny without losing sight of the realities that confront us every day. They bring the reader face to face with the ugly truths of life while at the same time presenting moral values and the dignity of man as a viable alternative. Because they want to present a realistic portrait of the world, all three deal extensively with violence and madness.

Let us first examine the attitudes to violence in these three writers. Contrary to popular critical opinion, Malamud's concern is not only with the passive suffering of his characters but also with violence as it manifests itself in a variety of forms. The frequency of violent and scatological incidents and language is much lower in Malamud as compared with Mailer nor does he delineate paranoia which results in violence as does Bellow. Violence manifests itself in the imagery of nature, suggesting that for Malamud violence is not merely a social or psychological fact but a law of nature, a

condition of existence. It acquires a metaphysical dimension. His is not the blood-and-guts variety of violence but a delicate web-like structure encompassing his characters. Violence is the clawing of the wind, the rustle of dark wings.

In Malamud the humanist tradition is dramatized through the idea of self-knowledge and suffering. The fixer walks in the shadow of Lear, Hamlet, Mann's Faustus. Violence is endured rather than generated.

A brutal and indifferent world looms over an insignificant crouching man, hardly visible in its engulfing shadow. This small man merely wants to eke out a living but even this attempt is defeated by the world. Violence flows from life itself. The fixer for instance, has barely begun to attain a better standard of living before he is imprisoned on the charge of murdering a child. Thus a Malamud character faces violence as a form of unwarranted punishment. The fixer is punished because he is a Jew.

Bellow, on the other hand, seems to extend the meaning of violence to accommodate a wider social perspective. In his Nobel Prize speech, this is how he described America:

In private life, disorder or near panic.
In families - for husbands, wives, parents,
children - confusion. In civic behaviour,
in personal loyalties, in sexual practices
(I will not recite the whole list, we are
tired of hearing it), further confusion. And
with this private disorder goes public
bewilderment.

The act of living on a demented planet is fraught with violence in Bellow. "The episodes in Mr. Sammler", says Bellow, "are meant to be typical of the madness in New York City middle-class life. But I may be a little behind".²

This violence makes the Bellow protagonist withdraw into a kind of shell. He becomes so introspective he drives himself to the point of insanity. Like Hamlet he is sick with too many abstractions. For verging on insanity or not he is usually an intellectual. In the middle of the most extraordinary and immediate situation, he tends to freeze into a stupor as he contemplates the condition of the world.

Cut off from the rest of the world he is unable to cope with its violence. In spite of this inability to cope with it, he is fascinated by it at times. Mr. Sammler, a sane old man, is mesmerized by the black pick-pocket, and Cantabile and other dishonest types have a strange appeal for Charles Citrine.

His is the bewitchment of someone watching an outlandish animal in a zoo. What he does not realize is that it is he who is the unicorn, a breed apart. Cut off by the glass cage of his mental activities, Bellow's hero is completely isolated, totally out of place in the madness surrounding him.

If Malamud creates self-enclosed worlds where the helpless are menaced by the predators in their neighbourhood and Bellow's canvas is national, even international, Mailer peoples his

urban landscape with men whose sense of personal inadequacy generates a compensatory aggression.

Mailer's attitude to violence is completely different because though he is a humanist his championship of the cult of Hipsterism justifies extreme violence. The following is a statement made by Mailer, explicating the Hip way of looking at murder :

Let's use our imaginations. It means that one human being has determined to extinguish the life of another human being. It means that two people are engaging in a dialogue with eternity. Now if the brute does it and at the last moment likes the man he is extinguishing then perhaps the victim did not die in vain... In the act of killing, in this terribly private moment, the brute feels a moment of tenderness, for the first time perhaps in all his experience. What has happened is that the killer is becoming a little more possible, a little bit more ready to love someone.³

This statement underlines the basic difference in the way Malamud and Bellow, on the one hand, and Mailer, on the other, deal with violence. Since Mailer's handling of violence is so unusual, it becomes necessary to discuss it at length.

Malamud conjures violence out of nature in the metaphoric language of poets, charging birds with a sense of menace, turning the wind into a predatory, clawing creature.

Bellow piles up image upon image of violence, and especially the violence stalking the cities, so that the cumulative effect is one of suffocation. But the richness of

his language ensures that the images produce suffocation subtly, like smothering a person with flowers instead of using the crude method of a plastic bag.

Mailer not only uses a plastic bag, he also employs a sledge hammer, hits between the eyes and below the belt.

Malamud and Bellow implicitly make clear their disapproval of violence. Mailer often approves.

While Malamud writes of the all-pervasive nature of violence and Bellow of the violence of the city, Mailer writes mainly of individual violence. Malamud and Bellow offer no glib solutions for salvation or a saner world - Mailer often begins with certain abstruse ideas and tries to fit his novels into these moulds.

Barbary Shore, for instance, is a novel built around ideologies. When he wrote The Naked and the Dead, Mailer was a communist sympathizer. At times the novel reads like a political treatise, specially some of the Cummings-Hearn dialogues. Mailer's disillusionment with communism resulted not in a break with it but a shift from Stalinism to Trotskyite Marxism which we find in Barbary Shore. As Diana Trilling says, "... Mailer has always carried the burden of social actuality of the intellectual thirties. He has engaged in politics... through his career, even in years when it has not been the literary fashion".⁴

The Naked and the Dead is not a pure recitation of ideology as Barbary Shore often seems to be. Though Barbary Shore has elements of fantasy and an eerie atmosphere with unreal people floating in and out it often reads like an ideological tract. Hollingsworth's cross-examination of McLeod, for instance, is more the erection of a platform for giving speeches such as:

I speak of that body of ideas and that programme which may loosely be called revolutionary socialism. It conceives of a society where the multitudes own and control the means of production in opposition to what exists everywhere today. It holds the true conception of equality where each works according to his ability and each is supplied according to his needs. It views the end of exploitation and the beginning of justice...⁵

This is faintly reminiscent of Chaplin's last speech in The Great Dictator where the barber is provided an opportunity to give a long speech, a speech representing Chaplin's sentiments.

The Deer Park is not as doctrinaire as Barbary Shore but a part of its concern is with the McCarthy witch hunt. Eitel refuses to help the congressional investigation committee but through social and professional ostracism is finally brought to his knees and is gently persuaded to testify. This is Mailer's indictment of democracy which deprives a man of his principles not through brute methods like

torture or imprisonment but through subtle application of pressure on the mind.

Mailer not only puts his ideologies into his books he also cannot prevent his personal life from impinging on his work and vice versa. He has been criticized for "too much autobiography in his nonfiction and too much ideology in his fiction".⁶

Therefore violence in Mailer results through clash of ideologies made incarnate in individuals. The difficulties of being a writer and a human being in America are to him synonymous. Violence in Mailer is reflective not only of what he sees around him but is a deliberately evolved experience of a dynamic encounter with life. In order to create, one must experience first. Schrader in his discussion on this aspect of Mailer's writing says : "The artist as writer and the artist as an existing human being are not to be separated. To write about courage adequately one must have courage and live by it".⁷

Mailer is the main character in The Armies of the Night. The narrators of Barbary Shore and The Deer Park are aspiring writers. Fieldler calls Deer Park one of "those troublingly circular and cabalistic books about books. The story of a boy who wants to write a book which is really the book we are reading, in which there is a boy who wants to write a book etc".⁸

Rojak - the Hip hero in the The American Dream - also has a lot in common with Mailer. Both went to Harvard, knew Jack Kennedy, ran for Congress. Mailer stabbed his wife at a party but Rojak succeeds in murdering his.

Mailer is fascinated by violence - not repulsed as Bellow and Malamud are. He says :

My conscious intelligence... became obsessed by the Russian Revolution. But my unconscious was much more interested in other matters : murder, suicide, orgy, psychosis, all the themes I discuss in Advertisements".⁹

Mailer can be said to have two attitudes to violence. One is the traditional attitude where violence is considered evil. But for Mailer this applies not to individuals indulging in violence but to the Establishment. Mailer is unabashedly anti-Establishment. Marcuse talks of the "new sensibility" which has become praxis. It emerges, he says, "in the struggle against violence and exploitation where this struggle is waged for essentially new ways and forms of life : negation of the entire Establishment, its morality, culture..."¹⁰ Mailer's ideas seem to be a refraction from Marcuse's pronouncements. His anti-Establishment stance is especially clear in The Armies of the Night where he takes up cudgels on behalf of the protestors and strongly condemns the brutality of the soldiers and those in power.

The other attitude Mailer maintains toward violence could only belong to the modern age: it is one of approval.

As a Hipster, Mailer advocates violence as a means to self-identify. A Hipster is a cool cat who is always ready for violent action. Mailer does not think that there is a choice between violence and non-violence. "It's rather between the violence of the individual and collective violence".¹¹ Quite a few thinkers agree that at times violence is the only solution - Hannah Arendt, Sartre, Fanon. In a repressive society it becomes the only means of asserting oneself and of getting one's rights. But Mailer has a more sweeping notion of violence. Killing without motive, rape, orgasm and the psychopathic mind, these are the parts that make up Hipsterism. Mailer says that he was :

a slave to anxiety, a slave to the fear that I could measure my death with every evening on the town, for the town was filled with people who were wired with shocks for the small electrocution of oneself. It is exhausting to live in a psychic landscape of assassins and victims...¹²

He discovered that the only way to survive in this psychic landscape was to become a psychopath. When Mailer stabbed his wife without motive or hatred and in full possession of his senses, it was a pure act, in accordance with his philosophy of Hip.

It is interesting to note, however, that Mailer is not an apocalyptic writer. He believes strongly that modern society is emasculating human beings and hence feels the need

of protest. But his faith in man and in the possibility of a better society remains intact so one can call him a humanist even though his is a slightly deranged form of humanism. Apocalypse is transcended by all three.

Having examined the attitude of these three writers to violence let us now look at the way they deal with physical violence.

In Malamud there are few instances of actual physical violence. In The Tenants, for instance, violence between people gets transferred to objects. Lesser's manuscript is destroyed by Willie Spearmint as an act of revenge. Lesser, in counter-revenge, attacks Willie's typewriter with an axe: "blow by blow, his eyes exuding damp, he hacked up Willie's typewriter. His blows made a clanging music. He chopped the machine till it was mangled junk. It bled black ink".¹³

The destruction of the typewriter stands for the destruction of Willie himself. The black ink representing the black man's blood - is this a sign of latent racialism in Lesser? Perhaps it also means that not two writers but two races are attacking each other.

When there is a moment of potential violence it gets diffused and resolves into stasis. Lesser, one of the only two whites at a black party arouses the antagonism of the blacks by sleeping with one of their girl-friends. He is saved from a brutal attack by Willie who engages him in a verbal

contest. Malamud, like Barth in The Sotweed Factor, is employing the Eskimo custom of a song duel in which quarrels are settled through song instead of violence.

When physical violence does take place, it takes place quickly without a graphic description of blood pouring out or viciously aimed blows. There is no lingering over the act of violence. In a book like The Fixer, in fact, where the situation presents plenty of potential for violence, there is instead concentration on mental torture, of mind under pressure in prison. Physical violence is sketched briefly, giving just the bare essentials. The fixer is beaten up brutally by his fellow prisoners who call him "Christ-Killer":

... Potseikin hit him with a knee in the back as Akimytch struck him on the neck with both fists. The fixer went down, his mind darkened in pain. He lay motionless as they kicked him savagely and felt as he passed out a terrible rage.

Afterwards he woke on his mattress, and when he heard their snoring retched. A rat scuttled across his genitals and he bolted up in horror. But there was a bit of horned moon at the small high barred window and he watched for a while in peace.¹⁴

In the above passage, violence ends in stasis. As a counter - point to this there are moments when violence dissolves into grotesquerie. The brutalizing effect of prison is depicted through grotesquerie which represents a jaded sensibility and the deadening of minds which are innured to

pain. For instance, while the prisoners are having soup, a prisoner with a club foot finds a dead mouse at the bottom of the soup pail. Instead of being revolted he is gleeful and goes on eating his soup, holding the mouse by its tail. He then "limped over to the men at the next pail and dangled the mouse in front of their faces, but though they cursed him into the ground no one left the pail. So he clumsily danced around with his dead mouse".¹⁵

Thus we have two contrasting modes: violence getting diffused into a moment of stasis and violence ending in grotesquerie. Malamud gives a significant form to violence and does not sensationalize it.

Of course, as is inevitable in prison, Yakov is subjected to physical torture. He is chained to the wall. The inhumanity of those in power is indicated when he is made to crawl across the prison courtyard on his swollen pus-ridden legs and feet to go to the prison dispensary. But this kind of torture Yakov can take. What he cannot bear is the indignity of the daily searches of his body - it starts with two a day and goes on to six. There is no logic to these searches -- there is nothing for Yakov to hide since he is in solitary confinement. They are obviously the design of a sadistic mind which knows how the invasion of privacy can break a person (and since there is a suggestion that the Deputy Warden is a homosexual they also have the function of titillating him).

The bolts of the door - there are twelve by the end of the book - are shot back one by one, then the Deputy Warden marches in with a guard and Yakov has to remove his clothes, one ragged cloth after another. He is searched six times a day "in the bitterly cold cell, standing bare-foot on the floor, each stone like a block of ice, as they poke their filthy fingers into his private parts".¹⁶

There is a feeling of moral outrage attached to this. In Malamud there is a unique sense that violence is indistinguishable from violation. It is an erosion of life not just from without but from within. Violence, hence, acquires an extra dimension by becoming psychological and taking on the sense of stigma.

During the hold-up in The Assistant - where one would normally expect brutality - violence is again modulated. Morris's dejection is such that he feels no panic or hysteria. He just sits quietly, muttering more to himself than to anyone else, "Times are bad",¹⁷ Although violence in this scene is physical, it is so only on the surface. In actual fact, it is the culmination of the long process of erosion of life which began ever since Morris started out in life. Morris's lack of resistance is not cowardice but a sapping of spirit. Even as he watches the gun descend on him there is no shrinking back or crying out. Instead of pain there is a consciousness of the years of frustration accreting :

Morris saw the blow descend and felt sick of himself, of soured expectations, endless frustration, the years gone up in smoke, he could not begin to count how many...

He fell without a cry. The end fitted the day. It was his luck, others had better.¹⁸

There is an attempted rape in The Assistant. After the violence commonly associated with rape - the kicks, struggle, tearing of cloth - the description ends unexpectedly with Helen reacting to the rape in the way Bobber had reacted to the hold-up. In a curious way, the assailant becomes an abstraction:

Helen felt his body shuddering against her. I am disgraced, she thought, yet felt curiously freed of his stinking presence, as if he had dissolved into a can of filth and she had kicked it away.¹⁹

There are some interesting techniques for rendering violence adopted by Malamud. For instance, in The Natural when Roy is shot by a mad woman, violence is stylized to a point where it is seen as occurring as a slow-motion, macabre dance of death:

She pulled the trigger (Thrum of bull fiddle). The bullet cut a silver line across the water. He sought with his bare hands to catch it, but it eluded him and, to his horror, bounced into his gut. A twisted dagger of smoke drifted up from the gun barrel. Fallen on one knee he groped for the bullet, sickened as it moved and fell over as the forest flew upward, and she, making muted noises of triumph and despair, danced on her toes around the stricken hero.²⁰

Real physical violence is found in The Tenants when Willie hits Lesser viciously and almost throws him out of the window; at the end of the book too when they attack each other with sabre and axe. This is not so much a racial confrontation as the eruption of frustration arising out of the attempt to write and live in an unsympathetic world.

Physical violence is related to the idea that living itself is an act of violence. The Malamud characters are unable to meet violence with violence. Their sensitivity does not allow them to join the rat-race.

Bellow's characters have the same sensitivity. They find it very difficult to live in a world which has so much violence in it. Bellow's heroes teeter on the edge of amentia because they cannot cope with the violence around them. And, as if it were not enough to have to observe it, violence, as it were, seeks them out : Citrine is threatened by Cantabille, Mr. Sammler is silently warned by the black pickpocket, Leventhal is shadowed by Allbee.

When madness is presented in realistic fiction one mad person is set up in relief against the normal workaday world. In Bellow's work the reverse is true where violence is concerned. The protagonist seems to be the only non-violent person in the midst of the raging violence and insanity around him. Hence most of the time when Bellow writes of physical violence it is in general terms, in terms of the violence to be seen every day

when one is walking down the street. Bellow writes of a total stranger walking into a Chicago office with an open razor in his hand and sweeping it over a secretary's throat "like a virtuoso"²¹ and disappearing forever (Humboldt's Gift); of opening a window and finding a man attempting to beat up a woman (The Victim); of sirens screaming at night letting the world know there has been one more rape, one more violent encounter with death (Mr. Sammler's Planet); of meaningless killing in the street - they kill the man who does not have a dollar, they kill the man who gives them fifty dollars (Humboldt's Gift).

The few instances of physical violence where the main character in the book is involved take place when he is pushed into it as Leventhal is by Allbee (and he is not too violent even then) or when he is going mad like Humboldt is.

When the protagonist wants to perform an act of real violence the scene builds up and then deflates into absurdity. Herzog goes to great lengths to get his father's gun in order to shoot his wife and her lover. But when he sees them through the window he finds he cannot shoot them, "his intended violence turned into theatre, into something ludicrous"²² But the scene does not end here. It leads to greater absurdity when Herzog and his daughter get involved in a minor accident and Herzog's gun is discovered by two cops who familiarly call him by his first name.

This inability to be violent is related to the protagonist's habit of constant cerebration. He cannot perform mindlessly. He has to analyze everything even with a gun in his hand. Violence needs cold-blooded evil, boiling hot rage, mindless indifference. Certainly violence cannot explode from a reasoning brain. It is as impossible to imagine a Bellow hero acting violently as it is to imagine Rodin's Thinker with a gun in the hand on which the chin is resting. Bellow's men would rather lie on a couch like Herzog and meditate on the condition of the world.

Violence is also explored through ideas. Since Bellow's men are intellectuals it becomes easy to deal with questions of violence through their thoughts. Thus Bellow presents violence to include the whole of society or as absurdity or as seen by an intellectual. These instances of violence are distanced either through humour or because they are described in such general terms. The one time when the reader is brought into close contact with violence, and is moved by it, is in the matter-of-factly presented court-room scene in Herzog. Herzog walks into a courtroom and finds himself listening to a child's murder being recounted objectively through witnesses.

The reader reacts to this in the way that he reacts in Catch-22 to the Rome street scene where, after all the crazy happenings, the sudden sombre tone jolts him into facing reality.

As in Malamud's The Tenants violence is symbolically performed on Citrine's Mercedes-Benz:

... my Mercedes-Benz had been attacked in the night... My elegant car, my shimmering silver motor tureen... was mutilated... the windshield was covered with white fracture-blooms. It had suffered a kind of crystalline internal hemorrhage.²³

Sometimes there is ambiguity in the way Bellow presents violence. The black pickpocket in Mr. Sammler's Planet is likened to a prince and though his way of earning a living is sordid, there is a kind of nobility in him. When Eisen hits him with a bag of irons, and he falls bleeding to the pavement we feel no satisfaction, only a sense of sorrow as we would at the crushing of a splendid animal. Is something wrong with our reaction? Or is Bellow saying that something is wrong with a justice that uses violence to punish violence?

As we saw earlier, Malamud's treatment of physical violence is controlled so that only what is essential is described. Bellow produces a distancing effect by delineating violence as it takes place in society as a whole. In Mailer, as can be expected since he often approves of violence, there is a surfeit of physical violence. An American Dream, specially, abounds in scenes of gratuitous violence. Since the novel revolves around a murder there is enough opportunity for gruesome detail.

When Rojack kills Deborah there is no condemnation of his action. He needs to kill her because he is far too

dependent on her. Even while he is choking her he starts feeling better. Her death is his rebirth: "I was weary with a most honourable fatigue and my flesh seemed new. I had not felt so nice since I was twelve. It seemed inconceivable at this instant that anything in life could fail to please".²⁴

One wonders if the genesis of this concept is in Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment where one of Raskolnikov's motives in killing the old woman is to convince himself that he exists. Mailer, however, succeeds in presenting only a crude version of the vast network of motives behind Raskolnikov's crime.

After Rojack kills Deborah he makes love to Ruta the maid - maybe this is his gesture to indicate that he is finally independent. He then wonders what to do with his wife's body. He suddenly has a desire to carve her up so that Ruta and he could feast on her body for days. Is the image of cannibalism used to suggest the cannibalism of American society one wonders? If so it does not work because although some critics have charitably suggested that Deborah is a symbol of America, nowhere in the book is such a concern for universals apparent.

Rojack finally decides to push Deborah out of the window in order to make her death seem like suicide. This gives Mailer another chance to describe in revolting detail Deborah's physical condition. Left to himself the reader might possibly be able to imagine that Deborah would not look pretty after

falling from ten stories. But Mailer has to let us know exactly where her head has ^caved in, how the blood has coagulated.

The only scene in which violence is handled with some degree of subtlety is in the police station when a black is systematically beaten up off-stage so that violence comes to us as a series of sounds rather than word-picture^s. In the rest of the book violence takes a crude form. Rojack, for instance, almost kills Shago because he addressed him in a disdainful manner. Shago is eventually murdered and Cherry is killed as well.

As we have noted before, when Malamud and Bellow write about violence, there are no graphic illustrations, no lurid detail of faces being destroyed, parts caving in, blood pouring out. Mailer, however, gives us close-ups of violence and that too enormous, exaggerated close-ups like the famous one of the eye of the murdered Janet Leigh in Psycho.

In An American Dream, specially, Mailer appears to be writing through a marijuana haze where details are magnified so that they fill up the whole space. The irony of this sensation-filled world is that the protagonist is supposed to be an intellectual. How different he is from Bellow's intellectuals. When Rojack, the intellectual, starts choking his wife he ends up killing her, feeling a sense of satisfaction and release. When Herzog goes out to kill his wife the gun is never used because he can see the absurdity of the situation.

In The Executioner's Song, on the other hand, although Gary Gilmore goes around shooting people, events are narrated in a matter-of-fact, simple style which is more effective than the pretentious language of An American Dream. Mailer himself says that he starts off in a new direction with every major work. The Executioner's Song was his answer to people who said he could not write simply or objectively.

In The Executioner's Song detail upon detail - the most trifling detail - is piled up in journalistic fashion till the reader gets to know a person through what he says or does, through his expression, his gestures. The result is that when a killing takes place one feels sorry for both the victim and the murderer : the victim because he is killed senselessly, the killer because Gilmore is a man who has never had a chance. Toplin says that simple distinctions between guilty killers and innocent victims is no longer possible. "Now most killers look like victims too. They are victims of an environment that places extraordinary stress on violence as a means of confronting problems and settling scores".²⁵ Faced with what to him is the unberable reality of losing Nicole, Gilmore can only turn to violence, the one solution he knows to problems.

In The Armies of the Night physical violence involves demonstrators and marshals. Mailer condemns the brutality of the soldiers and of those in power who command the soldiers. The marshals make arrests at the slightest pretext. Mailer sees

through it as having "the deepest sort of technological meaning: the technique of avoiding martyrs in riots. The essence of that technique is to arrest at random".²⁶

At the same time, Mailer complicates the issue by showing us contradictions. One assumes that soldiers and policemen are brutal and indifferent. We forget that they too are human and Mailer reminds us of this by presenting an MP who has horror in his eyes and trembles as he lifts his club.

Linked to the category of physical violence is the violence in war. Bellow and Mailer both write of war but not Malamud who prefers to write of the violence that springs from ordinary life and not from an abnormal situation like war.

The Naked and the Dead which won great acclaim for Mailer is a war novel. One would expect a profusion of physical violence since it is about war but Mailer does not limit himself to the violence between soldier and enemy. He is mainly concerned with the tensions involved in fighting a war one is forced to fight. With so much killing going on around them, soldiers are in the paradoxical situation of having to see their friends being butchered and having to help those whom they detest. It is an enforced brotherhood and this creates tension. Friction is common among soldiers and is caused by the clashing of strong personalities or racial prejudice. So while waiting to attack the enemy, they attack each other. Their fights are often very childish like children squabbling

during a game of war. For instance, Stanley imitates Ridges' laughter and then kicks sand into the foxhole he is digging. Racial prejudices too surface and erupt in violent verbal attacks as when Gallagher asks Goldstein "what's the matter, you want some gefilte Fisch?"²⁷ War, as Walsh says, "may dramatise deep-rooted racial tensions or re-enact in fable a brutish violence inherited from the persecution of Indians in the old frontier days".²⁸ There is also the fact of a constant encounter with death which keeps the soldiers on edge so that they have to take out their anger and sense of helplessness on someone.

Most of the soldiers are fighting because they have no choice but there are those who enjoy war. They are ambitious and know that in war one can get quick promotions. But war also throws up characters who find that they enjoy war because they like to kill. They can indulge their lust for blood without fear of retribution. In fact, war is one place where killing is rewarded. Croft is both ambitious and has a yen for violence: "He hungered for the fast taut pulse he would feel in his throat after he killed a man".²⁹

Killing in war is usually done mechanically, without thought - by the sensitive by deliberately switching off their mind or in defence. But certain men are made cruel by the power of holding another man's life in their hands so that subtle methods are employed to prolong the moment of death. Croft, for

instance, lulls a Japanese soldier into a false sense of security by giving him chocolate and cigarettes and water before killing him.

The hornet's nest incident has generated some discussion. The men have been climbing Mt. Anaka against all odds. What prevents them from making it to the top is a hornet's nest. When the hornets chase them they panic and run down. Mailer explains this device by saying, "war is disproportions, and the hornet's nest seemed a perfect disproportion to me. We were ready to lose our lives but we weren't up to getting stung by a hornet".³⁰

Besides exploring the psychology of men at war, Mailer writes of encounters between the Americans and the Japanese. Writing of one such encounter he refers to the fear psychology used by the Japanese during attacks:

Then he heard a sound which pierced his flesh. Someone called from across the river, 'Yank, Yank!' Croft sat numb. The voice was thin and high-pitched, hideous in a whisper. 'That's a Jap!' Croft told himself. He was incapable of moving for that instant. 'Yank!' It was calling to him 'Yank. We you coming-to-get, Yank'.³¹

The violence in this encounter is rendered cinematically, with both sound and visual effect:

He had a startling frozen picture of the Japanese running toward him across the narrow river. 'AAAAIIIIIIIIIIH', he heard again. In the light of the flare the Japanese had the stark frozen quality of men revealed by a shaft of lightning.³²

Central to the novel is Mailer's belief that even in an extraordinary situation like war, a man's essential nature remains the same. This is one reason he has used the technique of the Time Machine - not only to reveal the shaping forces which mould a character but also to suggest that once moulded in a certain cast, a person is true to that role at any time - whether it is normal or war time.

Cummings who has enough on his hands as General still finds time to play his twisted games of power. Ihab Hassan puts it this way: "Mailer shows that outrage is not only a product of military dehumanization; nor is it simply a matter of historical judgement... True outrage, Mailer implies, attends man's dream of omnipotence".³³ The dream of omnipotence gets more grandiose as one goes up the hierarchical ladder: from the officers to the general to the head of state and finally the nation. The victims are the soldiers who have to toe the line.

The irony is that the dream of omnipotence is one that these men nurture not only during war but also in peace. In The Naked and the Dead Mailer reiterates the concept that what happens in daily lives takes place on a bigger scale during the war. It takes place on a bigger scale because in war everything is exaggerated, time is syncopated because a man's life-span is speeded up, death coming much before it normally would. This extension of life into war McConnell calls a massive Homeric simile turned inside-out:

The killing, destructive activities of war are seen, that isn't as ironically deformed analogues to the acts of peacetime, but rather as ironically, horrifyingly clarified extensions of those acts. Rather than viewing war, with Homer and Virgil, as the apocalyptic cancellation of the life of the peaceful city, the polis or the urbs, Mailer presents us with a vision of war... as the ongoing, unacknowledged, and deeply nauseating condition of even the most comfortably pacific urban life.³⁴

Bellow too recalls the violence of World War II in Mr. Sammler's Planet. Mr. Sammler and his wife had to strip and wait with other Jews to be shot dead. But Sammler is missed by the bullet and manages to crawl through the dead bodies and hide in the forest. Bellow implicitly remarks on the contradictions and complexities of human nature when he enlarges upon the joy Mr. Sammler - a good man - experiences when he kills a German soldier.

Occasionally the language of Bellow and Mailer reveals a common impulse at work when describing the war dead, with details of swollen limbs and decaying faces:

Then they began to see the dead, the unburied Arab bodies... Sammler might never have noticed, might have taken the corpse for nothing but a greenish gunny sack, stuffed tight, dropped from a truck on the white sand.

... swollen gigantic arms, legs, roasted in the sun ...

In the sun the faces softened, blackened, melted, and flowed away.³⁵

The next quote is from Mailer :

The Japanese had been dead for a week, and they had swollen to the dimensions of very obese men with enormous legs and bellies, and buttocks which split their clothing. They had turned green and purple and the maggots festered in their wounds and covered their feet.³⁶

All three writers write of urban violence. The violence found during wars has been transferred to cities which have become the urban jungle. The modern polis experiences daily scenes of violence, of killing which in the past were enacted only during a war. Those familiar with life in the city would agree with Fromm when he says that the urge to be violent is part of a cultural situation and is not something inherited biologically.

Since Malamud's main concern is with the suffering of the small man, he creates in the mind of the reader the idea of a helpless man lost in the shadows of buildings that loom over him. This contrast between the small man and the indifferent city finds its visual image in Lesser, the lone inhabitant of the top floor, writing his book in the stillness of a doomed and abandoned building with the vastness of New York looking on.

Menace is ever-present in the deserted building in which Lesser stays. The other flats in this building are used as shelter by tramps, drunks, junkies who scratch drawing and graffiti on the walls:

... in a second bedroom a jungle sprouted... huge mysterious trees, white-trunked rising from thick folds, crowding four walls and into the third bedroom, dense ferny underbrush grasses sharp as razor blades, giant hairy thistles, dwarf palms with saw-toothed rotting leaves, dry thick-corded vines entangling gigantic cactus exuding pu, eye-blinding orchidaceous flowers - plum, red, gold - eating alive a bewildered goat...³⁷

This description represents the urban jungle. It evokes a luxuriant tropical forest, a blight overtaking vast territories. This is landscaped violence not of an individual but of a society and the whole modern civilization.

Besides affecting human beings the deprivations can be felt even in the physical aspects of the city. Buildings are torn down on such a large scale that "in New York who needs an atom bomb? If you walked away from a place they tore it down".³⁸

This is the violence of a consumer society which destroys nature, neighbourhoods, and as a result, the whole notion of communities and fellow-feeling.

The house is a psycho-cultural reality and one recalls the theory of Bachelard³⁹ that the house in which one grows up conditions one's perception of reality. The house becomes part of one's self because though the house does not live, the people living in it lend their life to the house, so that it too seems to be alive. But now demolition squads pull down what should be preserved. By doing violence to a house man is doing

violence to himself because he is destroying the life-enhancing agency that a house is.

The forced dislocation from a house can be a highly disruptive experience for most people. Marc Fried⁴⁰ says that the displaced react in terms of grief. They experience the feelings of painful loss, a continued longing for the lost home, anger, and there are even symptoms of psychological or social or somatic distress.

The source of violence on city and man is the same. The meaning of the term violence is extended to include violence done to man's mind by the terror of the unknown enemy and the brutality of modern society which destroys not only individuals but whole cities. Violence arises out of economic conditions, out of the ruthless inhumanity of a competitive capitalist economy. Morris Bober (The Assistant) keeps impossible hours, works himself to the bone and gets poorer: "At the end you were sixty and had less than at thirty".⁴¹ The gleaming grocery across the street takes away his few customers. This is the violence of a slow sapping, a gradual erosion of spirit, not the sudden outburst of anger or a savage blow.

Bober is the archetype for the oppressed, not just a Jew but all mankind subjected to violence because he is economically deprived. More insidious than physical violence is the slow erosion of life through social injustice and economic inequalities according to Honderich.

The difference is in our reaction - faced with the facts of inequality we react with sadness or sympathy whereas when we witness an act of physical violence we are shocked, outraged, horrified. The reaction to inequality is passive whereas this other kind of reaction is much more involved. Honderich gives many reasons for this, for instances, he says:

one notable difference between our awareness of the two orders of fact is that the agents of violence are inevitably in the foreground and the agents of inequality are not immediately to be seen. The man who sets a bomb or shoots another man is precisely within our focus. Not so with agents of inequality.⁴²

Honderich thinks that if our feelings concerned the victim rather than the agent, we would react equally strongly to inequality because what finally matters is suffering, distress and deprivation.

For Malamud, the violence of inequality matters and so his protagonist is always the deprived man: the grocer at the corner for instance, who has been replaced by huge, impersonal stores. Community is superceded by the indifferent city. The proliferation of the imagery of violence shows that Malamud is trying to project in fiction the same ethos as painted by Honderich.

Bellow also writes mainly of the violence in the city, for instance:

Chicago this night was panting, the big urban engines going, tenements blazing in Oakwood with great shwls of flame, the sirens wierdly yelping, the fire engines, ambulances, and police cars - mad-dog, gashing-knife weather, a rape and murder night...⁴³

Through this description of Chicago at night, Bellow builds a vision of the dead cities. Violence is not only rampant in Chicago but in all cities everywhere in America. There is such a surfeit of violence that it has become depersonalized. People are so constantly exposed to it that they feel no sense of outrage or shock. The brutalizing effect of this daily contact with violence is such that no hand is raised to help when someone is being attacked. People simply gaze at it in a state of "beatitude", (as Bellow puts it) as though the scene is taking place on their television screen. In Mr. Sammler's Planet when Feffer is being choked by the black pickpocket, people stand and watch and no one pays attention to Sammler's plea for help.

Bellow's men are the only ones who retain the capacity to react to violence. This is because, as has been mentioned before, they are sensitive and are capable of thought. Another reason is that they have deep within them a sense of the past and of tradition. They have antiquated notions of values and the manners and morals of a gentle age gone by.

Bellow presents violence in the context of society. We are not shown the old order in the process of crumbling. It has already eroded and disappeared, leaving no trace-except for

the Bellow hero - behind. The new order is here to stay. Nostalgic references to the past do not produce even a spark of reverence in the new generation which tends merely to be irritated. Bellow's heroes^e are anachronisms because they are the only ones who remember and care for the old order.

The demolition of the old order is symbolized by the unsentimental tearing down of buildings:

"The old boulevard now was a sagging ruin waiting for the wreckers... the wrecked walls and windows, the missing doors, the fixtures torn out, and the telephone cables ripped away and sold as junk".⁴⁴

The image of a building marked for demolition leads to the thought of doomed mankind: "A vacant building opposite marked for demolition. Large white X's on the window-panes... Eloquent of what? Of future non being..."⁴⁵

Most of Mailer's books are set in the cities but though a great deal of violence is present, it is individual violence that is his particular area.

Racial violence is present mainly in Malamud's work. Bellow's protagonist might be a Jew but this fact does not provoke violence. The genocide of the Jews haunts the memory of Mr. Sammler, but Bellow does not seem to focus on racial violence done to Jews or blacks in the U.S. Nor is the racial problem an integral part of Mailer's writing. Racial prejudice is mentioned as causing some tension in The Naked and the Dead

but that is only one out of a number of reasons for tension. Mailer hints at times (specially in The Armies of the Night) of the blacks asserting themselves : soon they will be so strong that it is they who will wield real power. Of the three it is Malamud who explores racial tension extensively. However he transcends the specifically racial imperatives to shape the predicament of modern man.

According to Mailer Black Power has become so violent a movement that most blacks have moved into the future, "into that Black Twenty-first century when Black Power had succeeded in rendering the white man invisible at will for the Black".⁴⁶ The black has come a long way from Ellison's Invisible Man where it was the black who was invisible.

Mailer also says that the black man has a split personality so that he can be wise chauffeur, drunken butler, pullman porter and at the same time, be a complete psychopath with a switch-blade in his hand.

There are Nazi sympathizers in America and Mailer writes amusingly of an encounter he has with one of them. Both of them are put together in a police van when they are arrested for taking part in a demonstration against the Vietnam War (The Armies of the Night). They first have an eye ball to eyeball confrontation and Mailer is aghast at what he sees. American Nazis, he says, are mad tormented fanatics with twisted psyches so that one can feel sorry for them but this

one had so much violence in his eyes that if they ever met in a dark alley one of them might kill the other - "it was not unlike holding an electric wire in the hand".⁴⁷

The Nazi loses the contest when he has to look away and instantly gets hysterical:

'You Jew bastard !' he shouted. 'Dirty Jew with kinky hair'.
They didn't speak that way. It was too corny. Yet he could only answer,
'You filthy Kraut!'
'Dirty Jew !' 48
'Kraut pig !'

Mailer has been forced to role-play as a Jew although he is literate and as an intellectual he can see the comedy of the situation. The Nazi attacks him because he is a Jew - one can see a link here between Malamud and Mailer. Bok, too, is accused only because he is a Jew.

In Malamud 'Jew' and 'suffering' become synonymous. Mythical overtones dehistoricise and universalize the suffering of Jews. When a Malamud character faces violence he does it not only as an individual but as an exemplar of a minority standing up with integrity to a ruthless majority. It is any minority that suffers, like that of the intellectuals in The Tenants. The implications of the term 'Jew' are extended beyond racial or historical spheres till it becomes a generic term for victims of the world. Malamud himself is emphatic about this : "Jewishness is important to me, but I don't consider myself only a Jewish writer. I have interests beyond

that and I feel I'm writing for all men".⁴⁹

More than Mailer or Bellow, Malamud is concerned with the violence done to the mind. For him violence in a prison does not mean so much physical violence as mental.

Yakov's sense of time is pulverized through a total subversion of the homeogeneous time scheme which forms man's consciousness. Time does not exist as flux for Yakov. Man's mind can be destroyed not so much by physical torture as by attrition of time, through long isolation where one's sense of time as sequence is destroyed.

For Bok, with nothing to do, time does not pass. Even something as unexciting as sweeping takes on special meaning for him because it gives him something to do.

He first tries to count the passage of time with some splinters - the long splinters are months, the short ones, days. But he soon gives that up. He begins to live in a limbo where time means nothing but the passing seasons. His sense of calender time, of history is slowly destroyed. When that happens he comes close to losing his indentivity. This form of violence which devastates man's selfhood is more pernicious than a volley of swift blows.

Bellow and Mailer too write of the violence sparked off by conflicting human relationships and since most of it is in the form of mental torture, one might say that this has to do with the category designated as mental violence.

For Mailer, even love and marriage can be violent as husband and wife turn from love to enmity. Marriage becomes a battle-ground where blood is drawn brutally. This is easily accomplished since husband and wife have been intimate and know where it hurts most. Marriage as battle-ground is superbly presented by Edward Albee in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? In the manner of George and Martha, Deborah and Rojack have a brutal marriage, each needing to tear the other apart.

Children, too, have to bear the brunt of their parents' violence. In Barbary Shore a child is exploited by her own mother. Guinevere wants her beautiful daughter to stay a baby so that she can act in films - there are not many roles for five-year-olds as there are for infants. Mailer is enacting here something that happens often in America.

Like Mailer, in each book Bellow explores violence through human relationships - between friends, husband and wife, parents and children. It is not convenient to look after idiot brothers, blind mothers and senile grandmothers and so they are packed off to homes for retarded children and old people.

What does the violence and suffering produce in the protagonist of these three writers? Characteristically, since a Bellow hero is inward-looking, the most violence he does is to himself. He is masochistic, his worst critic. While this self-directed mockery is missing in Malamud, the sense of real suffering is missing in Bellow. When a Malamud character

suffers, his suffering is tangible. When a Bellow character suffers he talks about it, writes letters about it, analyzes it to death. This brooding does not help his inner growth. Henderson is the exception - his change for the better is evinced in the use of animal imagery that "reveals the hero's gradual transformation from a lower into a higher creature, a kind of analogous chain-of-being progression from a pig-like to a lion-like nature".⁵⁰

The violence the Malamud characters have to undergo, on the other hand, almost turns them into saints. Sainthood is the outcome of received violence.

Bok is asked time and again to blame the crime on the Jewish community. But each time, though the treatment meted out to him gets worse, he refuses. When some criminals are to be freed on the occasion of a royal celebration, Bok wants to know if he is to be pardoned as a criminal or as an innocent man. When he is told that he is to be pardoned as a criminal, Bok says that what he wants is a fair trial, not a pardon:

Dont be foolish, said the former Jurist,
how can you go on suffering like this,
caked in filth? The fixer moved his
chains restlessly. I have no choice,
he said. I have just offered you one.
That's not choice, said Yakov.⁵¹

Through suffering, Bok changes from a moaning, wailing person to a Christ-like figure. He is deeply moved by the story of Christ. When he thinks of Christ's anguish, he might be

describing his own: "Jesus cried out help to God but God gave no help. There was a man crying out in anguish in the dark, but God was on the other side of the mountain".⁵²

Like Christ, Bok is being crucified though he is innocent. His resemblance to Christ is suggested by the fact that the nails in his shoes bite into his feet and his ride to the trial is like Christ's walk to calvary. People line the road, some openly weeping, wringing their hands, some calling his name.

Frank Alpine starts off as a petty thief but after he has taken part in the hold-up of Morris' store he feels remorse and tries to make it up by working in the store at a pittance. But even then he keeps alternating between phases when he does not steal and periods when he does. He is maimed by this internal ambivalence: "I am a very good guy in my heart... Even when I am bad I am good".⁵³

It is only after he has lost Helen, that he becomes completely good. Almost killing himself with hard work, he starves, freezes, stays up all night doing another job, just to keep the store going. Frank has himself circucised and converted to Judaism at Passover (Easter) time. This is the time of the resurrection of Christ and also marks the completion of Frank's regeneration.

S. Levin (A New Life) is a quixotic saint. Baumbach⁵⁴ points out that the hero of the contemporary American novel is often a sensitized outsider, called a marginal man by sociologists, who experiences the guilt of people around him and for their redemption makes a quixotic sacrifice of himself.

Levin, who only wants^a normal life, is prevented from pursuing the career he craves by the violence of small-college politics. Toward the end of the book he no longer loves Pauline but he is still willing to marry her although it means giving up a good job and taking on two children as well. Gilly wants to know why he wants to shoulder such a burden. "Because I can, you son of a bitch",⁵⁵ says Levin who by this sentence has turned himself into a Quixotic Saint, sacrificing himself for another.

In Mailer, the violence around him does not change the protagonist much - there is not much growth discernible in him. Rojack comes instantly to mind as the man who cannot grow. Reacting with violence to violence, he continues to be brutal and aggressive.

Earlier we had noticed in passing that there exists a certain nexus between violence and madness. The latter takes many forms. There is madness as aberration in the clinical sense at one end of the spectrum. At the other there is a certain unconventional behaviour which though noticed as deviation from established norms of social behaviour allows

the subject to function socially. Only when it is compounded with a violent emotion like anger or jealousy it takes on the quality of madness proper.

As we move from the study of violence to that of madness, we find that Malamud and specially Bellow deal extensively with eccentricity rather than complete madness. Mailer is interested in disturbed mental states. All three of them seem to feel that living in this world is bound to affect the mind. In Baumbach's words:

To live in this world... in which madness daily passes for sanity is a kind of madness in itself. Yet where else can we go? We are born into this nightmare and we do our best... to make the worst of it. And for all our massive efforts at self-extinction we continue to survive - a cosmic joke.⁵⁶

Bellow's men attempt to live by assuming madness. It becomes a strategy for surviving in an irrational world. Henderson breeds pigs; Herzog writes letters he never sends in which he solves all the problems of the world since he is unable to cope with his own. This kind of activity, the attempt by Herzog and his sort to control life by their knowledge constitutes the fantasy of rationalism. Behind these intellectual attempts to win over the world with abstraction and pure reason is the idea that reason conquers all. This is akin to Quixote's fantasy of romanticism. These strange, outlandish actions are interpreted by others as a form of madness. It can

be also seen as an attempt - carried to absurd lengths, admittedly - to preserve their sanity in a world gone mad.

Cast in the role of the Schlemiel, Henderson acts in a completely eccentric manner. Dressed in a red velvet dressing gown and a red hunting cap, he breeds pigs in the countryside on his stately grounds. Once when his wife is entertaining, he comes in his dressing gown to shake hands with the ladies, saying, "I'm Mr. Henderson, how do you do?". He does the same with his wife imagining the others saying to each other, "He doesn't know her. In his mind he's still married to the first. Isn't that awful?"⁵⁷

He plays a violin in his basement for his dead mother and father whispering, 'Ma, this is "Humoresque" for you.' Or 'Pa, listen - "Meditation" from Thaïs.'⁵⁸ He plays to the point of emotional collapse, gets into mad rages for no reason at all.

The one who is really mad, in the clinical sense of the term, is Humboldt. A manic depressive, he slowly goes to pieces because after his first great success as a poet, his talent has dried up. He becomes paranoid and develops a persecution mania: he is sure that the KKK is out to get him and expects to get shot as he reads on the sofa. He even looks under the hood of his Buick for booby traps.

He is completely insane where his wife is concerned. He is convinced that before marriage her father had sold her to one of the Rockefellers. He is wildly jealous and does not

allow her to go anywhere - even the super market - without him. This mania gets worse after he loses the poetry chair at Princeton. Kathleen even has to get his permission to go to the bathroom. Since she cannot take this any more, she leaves him and he goes berserk. He accuses a young critic named Magnesco of keeping her hidden in his room. In a comic scene Magnesco is rescued by group of lesbians dressed as longshoremen:

They had been having ice-cream sodas, and they came out and broke up the fight, pinning Humboldt's arms behind him. It was a blazing afternoon and the women prisoners at the detention centre on Greenwich Avenue were shrieking from the open windows and unrolling toilet paper streamers.⁵⁹

In this scene there is a feeling of hallucinatory communal frenzy. It is an enactment of madness. Humboldt's madness is assimilated to general, communal madness.

Humboldt's insanity is caused partly by the fact that his creativity has dried up but its true source is American society which surrounds a man with adulation when he is at the peak of his career and treats him with indifference when his fame starts receding.

It is not just the protagonists who are eccentric. Mad people loom up in every book. There is a complete portrait gallery of eccentric characters in the Bellow books:

Lucas Asphalter (Herzog) who loves his monkey more than anything or anyone else in the world; Shula - Mr. Sammler's

daughter - who wears a wig, attends every lecture and sermon, stuffs her shopping bag with "salvage, loot, coupons and throwaway literature",⁶⁰ who is obsessed with the idea of her father writing a biography of H.G. Wells and is willing to steal to help him in this imaginary project; Shula's husband Eisen, who thinks he has walked to Italy with a stick as a crutch to visit the Pope; Walter Bruch who buys toys and plays with them; Wallace who is interested in ordinary events only through great effort but is feverish where sporting statistics is concerned; Henderson's dead brother, Dick-the sanest of the family - who shoots a fountain pen because it does not work properly; Miss Lennox whose cottage is filled with the rubbish she collects - boxes, baby buggies, crates, old butter dishes, chandeliers; Hendersons ancestor's - some great states-men, some great loonies, like the one who rode his horse inside the Palazzo; Henderson's father who once lifted up the speaker's stand and threw it down into the orchestra pit; Humboldt's mother who does not speak; Menasha, an amateur physicist, who thinks the rotation of the earth can be slowed down if the whole race at a given time were to scuff its feet; Father Edmund who wears marvellous old negligees in the pulpit; Thaxter who thinks the only umbrella with class is the one with a natural hook - a manufactured hook will not do, it has to grow that way; Leventhal's sister-in-law, Elena, (The Victim) who hates hospital and goes hysterical at the thought of sending her son there.

Almost everyone - even those who seem sane - goes to a psychiatrist. Madness is all around including sexual madness. Sexual perversions are so abundant that even Bruch's arm fetish does not raise an eyebrow.

All these images of madness coalesce to form a universal picture of madness.

Instead of showing a world gone mad, Malamud reveals that continuous subjection to violence leads to a mental breakdown. The fixer, going through the torment of imprisonment without knowing whether his trial will ever take place, begins to hallucinate. He wakes up one night hearing a sweet high voice singing and sees the dead boy's face shining from a pit in the cell. Although he is dead he sings about how he has been murdered by a black-bearded Jew.

Malamud seems to be commenting indirectly on the technique of brain-washing which is still being used. When a person is constantly told that he is wrong he begins to hallucinate that he is indeed guilty. Hallucination is a form of confession, but even on the point of breakdown the fixer is strong-willed enough not to confess.

On another level, the black-bearded Jew mentioned in the song is the archetypal Jew of Gentile imagining. The hallucination represents an archetypal situation with the black-bearded Jew symbolizing the guilty Jew and the dead boy, the innocent Christ figure. The Jews continue to suffer for a

crime committed by their ancestors two thousand years ago. Society needs some scape-goat - the Jews are like the lepers who in medieval times, as Foucault shows, were ostracized through no fault of theirs.

On the night before the trial is to begin Bok has a hallucination in which dead prisoners come into his cell and stare at him:

Many stared wordlessly at the fixer and he at them, their eyes lit with longing for life. If one disappeared two appeared in his place. So many prisoners, thought the prisoner, it's a country of prisoners.⁶¹

This passage is reminiscent of Dante's Inferno where the dead people come and stare at Dante ("So many, that I never should have thought Death had been able to undo so many").⁶²

Malamud is reminding the reader that Bok is not the only one to have suffered and to have been wronged. A pattern is formed of a "country of prisoners".

From hallucination to madness is but a step. The fixer is often on the verge of madness, is shrouded in "yellow fog" or "painful stretches of light". He has difficulty recalling past events. He is afraid of going mad and "in his mind be forever locked in prison..."⁶³ Madness is a form of imprisonment, when one is locked within oneself, incapable of communicating with the world.

As in Bellow, a set of eccentric characters surround the central figure in Malamud. A New Life, specially, is full of them. One thinks of Joe Buckett building his house bit by bit and writing and re-writing his thesis on Sterne - as he himself says both take as long in the making as Tristram Shady in being born. There is Fabrikant who cuts himself off from the others and goes galloping around on a horse; Bullock surrounded by six-foot tall atheletes. In this book the protagonist is an eccentric too - Levin manages to do everything wrong, including tilting at the English literature/English language windmills.

Mailer's interest is not so much in madness as in psychology - in the behaviour of a person and the cause of any deviation. Marion Faye (The Deer Park) for instance, leads a depraved life. Though only twenty-four he is completely cynical, using human beings ruthlessly in experiments devised for his amusement. He presents a cool front to the world but this hides an imagination gone mad, a fermenting world of nuns, priests, God, the devil, and he himself a sinning priest. He becomes obsessed by the desire to drive Elena to suicide. Faye has become as twisted as he is because he has had an unhappy family life.

Rojack's is a strange kind of madness. His experience in the war when he kills four Germans under a full moon has filled him with pictures of death, so that he is "lost in a

private kaleidoscope of death".⁶⁴ This experience of violent death under a full moon has also given him an insane certainty of the moon's power over him. The moon can seduce him into walking the balustrades of balconies of apartments.


Rojack believes implicitly in evil spells and his wife's power to control events from a distance, of her contact with the moon. Rojack can even see objects talking to one another - he can see with "insane clarity" a TV set talking to neon tubes. But Rojack's insanity is not certifiable - he is a sane man with pockets of madness.

Barbary Shore has a hallucinatory atmosphere and the people inhabiting the ramshackle rooming house seem to be lurking on the fringes of insanity. This is specially true of Lennie and Hollingsworth. Hollingsworth has a schizophrenic personality - a zombie most of the time he suddenly becomes prurient and obscene. This divided self is reflected in his room which is terribly clean in parts and inordinately messed up in others.

Lennie talks in a strange, affected manner. She can see Christ in a mouse, throw black paint around her room in a moment of violent frustration.

Madness is hinted at in their past. Certain passages point to the experience of shock treatment. For instance, when Monina bites Hollingsworth's hand, his reaction is unexpected and extreme: he screams his innocence, his other hand fumbles through his hair looking for electrodes.

In The Executioner's Song Gilmore behaves normally most of the time when he is on parole. But he can suddenly get violent and beat up people. When Nicole leaves him, he goes berserk, robbing two men and killing them. When asked later why he had to kill people who had given him the money and not resisted he says he does not know. He kills in a phase of temporary madness and when he reverts to normalcy says he should be executed for having killed men with families.

In Mailer, then, the nexus between violence and madness is complete. They are two faces of the same coin. Whereas madness is part strategy, part disorientation caused by a crucifying experience in Bellow and an image of suffering embodying the struggle for survival in Malamud, in Mailer madness has the peculiarly staccato sound of perversion. It has the humourless watchfulness of a beat^s turned man-eater through atrophy. Each captures the special  nuance of insanity bred by modern society in relentless pursuit of material comfort. If Bellow exemplifies it through the souring of reason and Malamud by reducing suffering to a searing absurdity, Mailer's strutting characters parody their own macho image through their aggressive posturing.

Although Malamud and Bellow are more interested in eccentricity and the state of the mind under pressure, they too apply psychological theories to their characters.

Discussing necrophilia, an obsession with dead bodies, Fromm quotes The Futurist Manifesto (1961) of F.T. Marinetti. One of Marinetti's ideas is that "the intoxication of great speeds in cars is nothing but the joy of feeling oneself fused with the only divinity".⁶⁵ Sportsmen like the Natural, are victims of this feeling of God like omnipotence. Hence when they find that the omnipotence in sport cannot be applied to life, they fall prey to moods of intense depression. This they attempt to fight by repeating certain routine acts obsessively to fill the sense of void. In a case of this sort even eating can become a pathological condition. Over-eating becomes a way of trying to fill the empty spaces within oneself. As Fromm puts it, "greed is one of the strongest non-instinctive passions in man, and it is clearly a symptom of physical dysfunctioning, of inner emptiness and a lack of a centre within oneself".⁶⁶ The mother in The Tin Drum, for instance, eats herself to death. In the same manner, when Roy Hobbs starts feeling dissatisfied with the life he is leading, he gorges at a party just before a crucial game. In Humboldt's Gift Ulick - Citrine's brother - wolfs down a fantastic amount of food just before a major operation. Thus both Bellow and Malamud depict greed as an indication of inner emptiness as well as an inability to face a major event which could change one's life totally.

Bellow and Malamud include idiot figures in their books. Augie March has an idiot brother and although this is an externally presented character, he is shown to have feelings. He is very attached to his family and is extremely unhappy when he is abandoned in a home for retarded children. But though miserable, he acquires a kind of dignity - he has more dignity, in fact, than some of the sane adults of his family.

The idiot girl in a Malamud short story, "The Silver Crown", is, like Benjy and Lennie, a huge bulk with a small mind. A grotesque figure with a broad unfocussed, fleshy wet face, she is bloated, making gurgling moaning sounds. But she is not central to the story and is more like a lost ghost blundering in and out of a nightmare. We are not taken into her consciousness and, as in O'Connor, her incapacity to engage in mental activity is suggested by the incoherent noises she makes.

Grotesquerie, in terms of deformity represents an inner deformity sometimes in Malamud. The clubfoot in The Fixer is deformed but he has also been deformed internally by the brutalizing effects of prison life. The Natural features a deformed fan whose unreasonable hatred of Hobbs and complete adoration of the hero Hobbs has replaced, reveals a lopsided development. Since his own life is empty, he is totally obsessed with baseball and its stars so that they are all that matter. His life is lived vicariously through passionate involvement

with baseball players. Lasch in his discussion on narcissistic patients quotes Kernberg who says that these patients "often admire some hero or outstanding individual" and "experience themselves as part of that outstanding person". The star is seen as "merely an extension of themselves".⁶⁷

Malamud presents other grotesque, crazed creatures. Marfa Golov, the evil insane mother of the murdered boy in The Fixer is one. She has helped her lover to murder her own son. The mad Harriet Bird is another. She kills only those sportsmen who have made it to the top. The fact that she kills with a silver bullet shows that this is ritualistic killing like the killing of the impotent king, or more recently, the killing of the Kennedys.

Perhaps it is worth mentioning that both Mailer and Bellow bring in the Kennedys in their books. Charles Citrine knows Robert Kennedy personally in Humboldt's Gift. Mailer admired Kennedy whom he considered a natural hipster because he believed that "Kennedy's personal style bridged the American gap between the politician and the film star".⁶⁸

Kennedy is mentioned often in An American Dream. According to Klinkowitz, "what is special about Kennedy in this novel is that he and Rojack share a vision of "the abyss", a suspected hollowness at the center of life more final than death and which can only be resisted by the most daring heroism".⁶⁹

Turning now to imagery, we discover that the most remarkable technique evolved by Malamud to convey a scene of violence as something rooted in the instinct of life is its expression through ornithological imagery.

Birds suggest different things. Let us first look at the following passage:

"And death is what you will get. It's on your head, Bok". "On yours," said Yakov, "And for what you did to Bibikov".

Grubeshov stared at the fixer with white eyes. The shadow of a huge bird flew off the wall. The lamps went out and the cell door clanged.⁷⁰

The shadow of a huge bird flying off suddenly creates a sense of man existing on two levels of reality. Something ordinary becomes menacing when the bird's wing span expands in the shadow. It is an image akin to the giant dove in Kafka's "Hunter Gracchus".

A bomb thrown as the fixer is riding to the trial is likened to a bird:

A man with a strained face and deadly eyes threw his hand into the air as though it had caught on fire... a black bird seemed to fly out of the white hand clawing the air.⁷¹

Even written words are birds: "Sometimes Yakov lost sight of the words. They were black birds with white wings, white birds with black wings."⁷²

Morris is an old bird: "It made the clerk uncomfortable to see the wet-eyed old bird brooding over him".⁷³

The fate of the store is a bird: "The fate of his store floated like a black-feathered bird dimly in his mind..."⁷⁴

When Malamud wants to present a visual image of a feeling of relief he writes: "... the clerk experienced a moment of extraordinary relief - a tree full of birds broke into song..."⁷⁵

Why is there such a profusion of bird imagery in Malamud? Perhaps because birds can be both violent and gentle. As birds of prey they are the symbols of violence in the world and are also the symbol of death. They suggest menace because they swoop down out of nowhere like evil which reveals itself at the moment of destruction. The ambivalence is in the fact that birds are also free and creatures of beauty, their song evokes happiness and hope.

Malamud operates on two planes of reality. By piling up bird-imagery, a montage effect is created which stands for menace and for peace. The pattern of destructive-creative symbols is unique to his work.

In fact, different aspects of nature are called forth to embody violence: "The early November street was dark though night had ended, but the wind, to the grocer's surprise, already clawed. It flung his apron into his face :..."⁷⁶

"The thought had lived in him with claws".⁷⁷

"He sat in his prison clothes in the dark cell, his beard tormented, eyes red, head burning, the acid cold cracking his bones. The snow hissed on the window. The wind seeping through the split glass sank on him like an evil bird gnawing his head and hands".⁷⁸

"The wind bayed at the window like starving wolves... The cold glowed in the cell. It sometimes struck him with pain, pressing his chest so hard it hurt to breathe".⁷⁹

emphasis mine

The store in The Assistant is referred to in terms of funeral imagery, to suggest that those who work there are as good as dead:

"In a store you were entombed".⁸⁰

"This kind of store is a death tomb...".⁸¹

"What kind of a man did you have to be born to shut yourself in an overgrown coffin...".⁸²

"He heard heavy silence below. What else can you hear from a graveyard whose noiseless tombstones hold down the sick earth? The smell of death seeped up from the cracks in the floor".⁸³

One remembers Raskolnikov's coffin-like room in Crime and Punishment.

Time is presented as ravager as well as regenerative process. Endless time in The Fixer is suggested by the use of the present tense because the past and specially the future hold no meaning for Yakov:

"Then he began to wait again. He waits."⁸⁴

"He waits.

The snow turned to rain.

Nothing happened".⁸⁵

Malamud here seems to be creating the archetypal image of waiting as Beckett does in Waiting for Godot.

In Malamud there are menacing birds but there are also singing birds. Similarly the imagery of entombment gives way to the rebirth of Frank Alpine when he falls into Bober's grave and literally rises from the dead like Lazarus. The fixer through having to suffer becomes strong. Malamud's protagonists are ordinary men who get strength through suffering.

Violence, then, is redeemed, death is overcome. Time, ultimately, is redeemed too. Though there is negative bird and death imagery the same imagery sometimes acquires positive connotations.

The mythical elements that Malamud assimilates to his novels do not abstract violence. The Grail Quest in The Natural

and the pattern of rebirth in A New Life and The Assistant are presented in far too generalized a form to blur the sense of man struggling against adverse circumstances. Mythic patterns do not diffuse the typically contemporary sense of violence as an urban phenomenon.

Myths bridge the gap between individual grotesquerie and social deformities by presenting violence as an archetypal situation. The presence of mythic patterns and folklore reveal Malamud's concern with contemporary social problems which are embodied in the hero's inner conflict. In this Malamud seems to follow Dostoevsky's technique in Crime and Punishment where the problems of pre-revolutionary decadent Russian society are made incarnate through the character of Raskolnikov. As in Dostoevsky a balance is maintained between claims of historical necessity and the uniqueness of individual character.

Violence in fiction can take physical or psychological form. Malamud does not render it separately as psychological or social or physical violence. He turns violence through his imagery into a compound of hostility which pervades the novel and surrounds the small man. But it produces in the sensitive Malamud character a drastic change. It ultimately becomes an agent which brings out the best in him.

When we examine Bellow's language we find that he invests everyday, ordinary objects with menace. One is made aware of the violence of life where the mere act of living has become a

courageous undertaking :

"... the light ... over the water was akin to the yellow revealed in the slit of the eye of a wild animal, say a lion, something inhuman that didn't care about anything human..."⁸⁶

"... the concussion of the train, and the streaked face of the lead car with its beam shot towards them in a smoulder of dust".⁸⁷

"... the tungsten in the bulb like little burning worms that seemed to eat up rather than give light".⁸⁸

"... an umbrella flung open, like a bat in the chill current of air".⁸⁹

"It was a white comb, white bone, its teeth darkened yellow..."⁹⁰

"... the wind ringing in the empty squares of wound-coloured rust..."⁹¹

"In a corner of the cold porch stood the wheelchairs, glittering, lightweight, tubular, stainless steel metal, with batlike folds".⁹²

"In the racketing speed of the howling, weeping subway..."⁹³

"... the TWA tunnel, like an endless arched gullet..."⁹⁴

"... she was so white that the lipstick raged on her mouth".⁹⁵

"The odours of this building clutched at your face..."⁹⁶

"... there lay the instrument (violin) ... inside that little sarcophagus..."⁹⁷

"... the high yellow urinals like open sarcophagi..."⁹⁸

"Of course the phone was smashed. Most outdoor telephones were smashed, crippled".⁹⁹

"... the plastic telephone instrument is smashed, and a stump is hanging at the end of the cord".¹⁰⁰

"The bell was slamming, bangalang, and deeper down the road, gulping passionate shrieks, approached the mortal-sounding sirens".¹⁰¹

Even the innocent pastime of sports acquires a violent dimension:

"... a man with red hair who struggled forward, angry with his partner, as though the race were a pain and a humiliation, which he could wipe out only by winning".¹⁰²

"He's vicious, he leaps, he cheats, he gets fiery in the face, and he'll trounce everybody without pity, man, woman or child..."¹⁰³

Language transforms operations into savagery as though the aim were to murder brutally rather than cure:

"... they break into your chest, remove the heart, lay it on a towel or something..."¹⁰⁴

"I don't know what I expected to see when I entered Ulick's room - blood stains, perhaps, or bone-dust from the power saw; they had pried open the man's rib cage and taken out his heart..."¹⁰⁵

"To enter an unconscious body with a knife? To take out organs, sew in the flesh, splash blood?"¹⁰⁶

Bellow turns human beings into creatures or objects:

"...his dark dense mustache... resembled fine fur".¹⁰⁷

"... he looked like a giant thrush".¹⁰⁸

"I had seen her one morning before she was made up... completely featureless, a limp and yellow banana skin, without brows or lashes and virtually without lips".¹⁰⁹

There is the inevitable presence of the grotesque and the macabre. When the world is grotesque its creatures are grotesque as well, for as Hays puts it:

For writers who describe an era of disappointment, depression, despair, even self-disgust - whether their protagonists rise above such conditions or not - a maimed individual has been a particularly apt symbol.¹¹⁰

Perhaps that is why there are so many cripples in Bellow: Einhorn in The Adventures of Augie March, Mr. Benjamin in The Victim, Valentine Gersbach in Herzog are all cripples. The girl who has murdered her own child in Herzog has the diabolical attributes Hays has described - lameness and red hair. When Citrine (Humboldt's Gift) loses Renata, he gets sympathy from a "furiously white limping woman"¹¹¹ with a "face of scalding white".¹¹²

Bellow conveys grotesquerie through eyes:

"The damaged left eye seemed to turn in another direction, to be preoccupied separately with different matters".¹¹³

"Look how happy she was grinning with her flat nose and gap teeth, the mother-of-pearl eye and the good eye..."¹¹⁴

Through all these images a nightmarish world is evoked pervaded by decay and decadence. Death looms over this nightmare. Bellow is obsessed by death and each book has passages of death and death imagery such as the following:

"Brown clay and lumps and pebbles - why must it all be so heavy. It was too much weight, oh, far too much to bear... But then how did one get out? One didn't, didn't, didn't! You stayed, you stayed!"¹¹⁵

"... her fingers had lost their flexibility. Under the nails they seemed to him to be turning already into the blue loam of the graves. She had begun to change into earth!"¹¹⁶

But in Bellow there is also the positive image of nature rejuvenating itself, of new life after death:

Beneath this grass the earth may be filled with carcasses, yet that detracts nothing from a day like this, for they have become humus and the grass is thriving... The crimson begonias and the dark green and the radiant green and the spice that pierces and the sweet gold and the dead transformed...¹¹⁷

... an odour of violence came off him, a kind of clammy odour of rut, and O'Brein, on my other side, who had shown a pronounced smell already over-sweet and very stale, was throwing a new odour, something like the funk a bully emits when he heads for a face-to-face meeting.¹²¹

Perhaps Mailer is suggesting Rojack's having sunk to an animal state because as Fromm says, "those wishing to speculate might consider that the fascination with faeces and smells constitutes a kind of neurophysiological repression to an evolutionary stage in which the animal was oriented more by smell than by sight".¹²²

Like Bellow, Mailer often likens man to an animal, a predatory beast most of the time. Deborah, for instance is time and again compared to a beast of prey:

"A powerful odour of rot and musk and something much more violent came from her. It was like the scent of the carnivore in a zoo".¹²³

"... making love she left you with no uncertain memory of having passed through a carnal transaction with a caged animal".¹²⁴

Even the wall paper in Deborah's house is like a menacing jungle, the right setting for the carnivore that she is.

"... every vertical surface within was covered with flock... a hot-house of flat velvet flowers royal, sinister, cultivated in their twinings, breathed at one from all four

walls... It had the specific density of a jungle conceived by Rousseau..."¹²⁵

Other people too are given the traits of creatures:

"... a deep smell came off Kelly, a hint of big foul cat, carnal as the meat on a butcher's block..."¹²⁶

"Front-face he looked like a bird, for his small nose was delicately beaked and his white teeth were slightly bucked".¹²⁷

Eyes fascinate Mailer as they do Bellow. Most of the time the peculiarity of the eyes suggests the inner decay:

General Cummings eyes are "large and gray, and baleful, like glass on fire".¹²⁸

"Two circles of blue, identical daubs of pigment, stared back at me, opaque and lifeless".¹²⁹

In The Armies of the Night a savage Marshal has eyes which in "Cinemascope would have blazed an audience off their seat for such gray-green flame could only have issued from a blowtorch".¹³⁰

In Mailer we do not have the positive imagery found in Malamud and Bellow where the suggestion of rebirth and resurgence is present even amidst death and decay. But in spite of that Mailer does seem to have faith that humanity will somehow overcome although he is realist enough to know that total madness can overtake the world. His humanism can be perceived in the last paragraph of The Armies of the Night

where there is an equal proportion of hope and despair:

She is America, once a beauty of
magnificence unparalleled, now a
beauty with leprous skin. She is
heavy with child... and languishes
in a dungeon whose walls are never
seen... she will probably give birth,
and to what? - the most fearsome
totalitarianism the world has ever
known? Or can she, poor giant,
tormented lovely girl, deliver a babe of
a new world brave and tender, artful
and wild... 131

Critics have located humanistic triumph in the patiently suffering characters of Malamud or the regeneration of Bellow's anti-heroes who by grasping the nettle grow into self-awareness. The reassertion of humanistic values by putting their exemplars to test is self-evident in the works of these writers. What has not been fully realised is the manner in which this growth into knowledge is enacted through the transition from a negative to a positive scale of values implicit in the images of death and destruction. The two kinds of death, one a natural consequence of violence both self-directed and otherwise and the other an achieved humanist value, are polarities that are not mutually exclusive. The latter is a symbol of human growth attained through a stint on the cross. The problematic of self under stress both external and internal when the self continues to be ambiguous is presented through images which have both negative and positive connotations. Bellow's work dramatizes the immense effort of the mind to gain control over circumstance. In Bellow, as in Malamud, experience and idea, the individual and communal, the rational and irrational are inextricably mixed.

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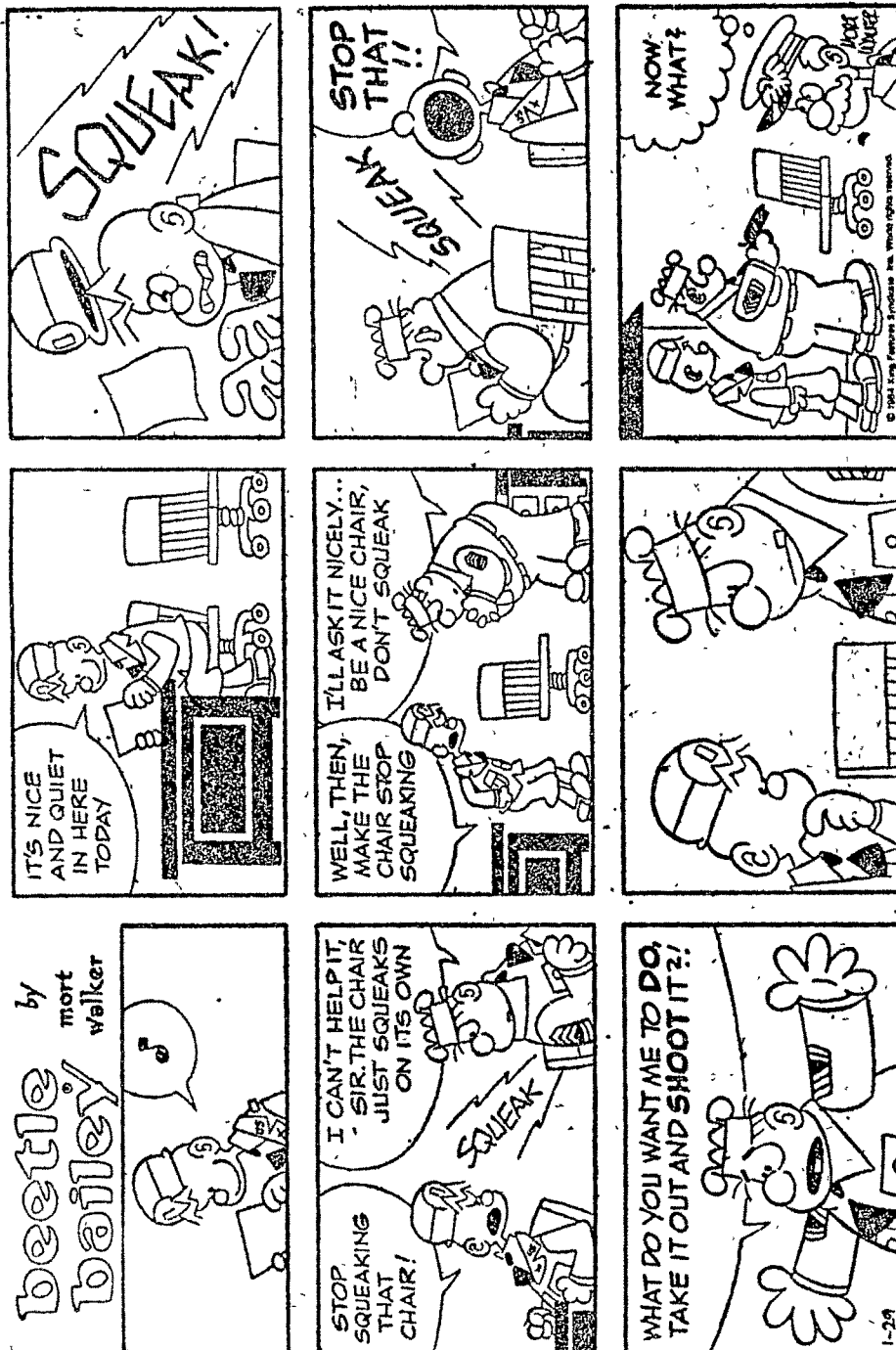
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beetle bailey

by mort walker



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