"A WHIRLWIND AT MY BACK..."

SPINOZISTIC THEMES IN BERNARD MALAMUD'S THE FIXER

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"First let me ask you what brought you to Spinoza? Is it that he was a Jew?"

"No, your honor. I didn't know who or what he was when I first came across the book -- they don't exactly love him in the synagogue, if you've read the story of his life. I found it in a junkyard in a nearby town, paid a kopek, and left cursing myself for wasting money hard to come by. Later I read through a few pages and kept on going as though there were a whirlwind at my back. As I say, I didn't understand every word but when you're dealing with such ideas you feel as though you were taking a witch's ride. After that I wasn't the same man. That's in a manner of speaking, of course, because I've changed little since my youth."

The speaker is Yakov Bok, the unlikely hero of Bernard Malamud's The Fixer. At this point, early in the novel, Yakov speaks truthfully when he says that he has changed little since his youth. But over the next two and a half years (the time-period covered in the novel), he will undergo profound change and impressive moral growth. He suffers; he learns; he grows.

Spinoza's name and ideas appear again and again at crucial moments in the course of the hero's moral development. Yakov Bok's verbal account of Spinoza's ideas is often comically primitive, but his understanding far outstrips his ability to articulate. By the end of the novel, his sufferings have led him to a deep grasp of certain of Spinoza's ethical and political doctrines. In fact The Fixer can be plausibly read as a "Bildungsroman" in which the hero's growth is marked, in great part, by his increasing understanding of Spinoza's ideas.

I. The Fixer, Bernard Malamud's fourth novel, was published in 1966. Set in pre-revolutionary Russia, it is a fictionalized version of an actual event -- the celebrated Beiliss Case. Though the critical response to The Fixer was somewhat mixed, the work immediately won the National Book Award and its author was awarded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

Thematically, the novel is effective on two different levels. On the one hand, it is a dramatic political statement about the evils of racism, written at a time of severe racial turmoil in the United States. At another level, however, the work is a timeless account of one character's moral development from ignorance to understanding, and thereby from passivity to activity. Since Spinoza's ideas play a central role in the development of this second theme, it will provide the focus of this study.

The title-character of The Fixer is Yakov Bok, whose name, appropriately, means "goat" in Yiddish. He is an impoverished, unfortunate and unhappy fix-it man from a small Jewish shtetl in the Russian countryside near Kiev. In six years of marriage his wife bore him no children, so he stopped sleeping with her. She soon ran off with a goy she met in the local

tavern. As the novel opens, the fixer gives voice to his disgust with his life as he explains to his father-in-law why he is leaving the shtetl to try his luck in the big city of Kiev:

> I've had to dig with my fingernails for a living. What can anybody do without capital? What they can do I can do, but it's not much. I fix what's broken -- except in the heart. In this shtetl everything is falling apart...And who can pay to have it fixed let's say he wants it, which he doesn't. If he does, half the time I work for nothing. If I'm lucky, a dish of noodles. Opportunity here is born dead... I don't want people pitying me or wondering what I did to be so cursed. I did nothing. It was a gift. (p. 7)

This passage sums up much of Bok's self-understanding at the beginning of the novel. He is a poor man who has had bad luck all of his life, and who has done nothing to deserve either his poverty or his misfortune. Disgusted with the sorry plight of the "chosen people," he has given up his belief in the God of his forefathers. Bored, embittered and frustrated by the poverty of the shtetl, he has resolved to try to change his luck by leaving in search of "a new life."

The search for a new life is a recurring theme in Malamud's works. Bok, like other Malamud characters, plans to shed his past in order to start anew. Before leaving the shtetl he shaves his beard to change his appearance. His father-in-law, Schmuel, gives him a package with prayer-shawl and phylacteries, but Bok drops the package into the Dnieper on the way to Kiev, symbolically rejecting his own Jewishness. In order to take a job offered him by an anti-Semite, he assumes a false name. In these and other ways, Bok hopes to leave his old life behind. But Yakov will learn, as reflection on his Spinoza-readings might have taught him, that a person's past cannot be shed so simply, and that an individual's identity is formed by and deeply embedded in a social, historical and political context. Only through understanding some of the complexities of that context can the fixer achieve the kind of self-determination that might allow him to create for himself a new life.

Failing to find work within the Jewish quarter of Kiev, Bok ventures out into the surrounding neighborhoods in hopes of locating a job which might pay more than noodles. He chances upon a wealthy man, fallen face-down, drunk, in the snow -- Lebedev by name. Despite Lebedev's lapel-pin indicating membership in the anti-Semitic "Black Hundreds" organization, Yakov saves his life and helps to carry him home. Later, concealing the fact that he is a Jew, Bok accepts, as a reward, Lebedev's offer of a job. He is employed as a resident overseer and bookkeeper at a brick-factory owned by Lebedev. The factory is located in a part of the country near Kiev in which Jews are not permitted to reside (literally "outside the Pale"), so Bok lives under a false name, in constant fear of being found out. Though he alienates the other employees by thwarting their efforts to steal, all goes well until the mutilated body of a twelve year-old boy is found in a cave near the factory. When, by chance, his co-workers discover that Yakov is a Jew, they fabricate incriminating stories in order to implicate the fixer in the death of the child. Bok is duly arrested and imprisoned under suspicion of "ritual murder" -- of killing the child to obtain blood for use in making Passover matzos.

The remaining 250 pages of the novel focus on the fixer's sufferings and discoveries as he spends the next two and a half years in prison waiting to be formally indicted for his alleged crime. The conditions are horrible, and they seem only to get worse and worse. At first he is beaten by other prisoners who share his cell. Then, worse, he is placed in utterly solitary

confinement. The walls of his cell offer little protection from the cold of the Russian winter, and he is provided only minimal clothes for warmth. He has a filthy insect-ridden mattress on which to sleep and his food consists of thin soup sometimes garnished with roaches or rats. He is slowly poisoned by his keepers who hope that in his weakened condition he can be induced to confess. He is subjected to invasive and humiliating searches twice daily. When it seems as if things could not possibly get any worse, he is chained to the wall of his cell and the number of searches is increased to six per day.

Malamud recounts these conditions in relentless and even monotonous detail. The reader identifies with the fixer, vicariously experiencing his suffering. Moreover, the reader shares the fixer's sense that the entire episode is absurd -- that a man who is at most guilty of a misdemeanor (living illegally in a restricted area) is being made to suffer beyond all endurance. A Jew who long ago renounced belief is charged with a crime which (were such a crime to exist at all) would presuppose the most fanatical religiosity. A man who loves children and desperately wanted to be a father is accused of killing a child. A thoroughly apolitical man has become a pawn in large-scale political conflicts of which he knows nothing. Yakov keeps asking himself, "What did I do to deserve this?" but there is of course no answer forthcoming.

Malamud skillfully uses the apparent absurdity of the situation in developing his theme. Like other characters in Malamud's novels, Yakov Bok is suffering for no real reason other than the fact that he is Jewish. It often seems as if, for Malamud, suffering is what being Jewish is all about. On the other hand, Malamud intends a more universal meaning, for the fixer's plight is really that of all who suffer in life without understanding the source or purpose of the misery. The long-suffering Jew of Malamud's fiction is in fact everyman.

Though the fixer's suffering is unjust and in one sense absurd, it is not without consequence. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, his beliefs and attitudes begin to change as a result of what he sees and undergoes. Yakov learns that behind the surface of his apparently absurd and unintelligible situation, historical and political causes are at work which can indeed be understood. As he comes to understand what is happening, Bok grows in personal strength as in moral stature. By the end of the novel, the simple, befuddled, and narrowly self-interested fix-it man of the early chapters has been transformed into a formidable adversary of the forces of reaction in pre-revolutionary Russia.

II. Spinoza's ideas play a role throughout Yakov Bok's development as a character. Before leaving the shtetl, the fixer stayed up nights reading selections from Spinoza's writings. As he says in the passage quoted above, once he started reading he "kept on going as though there were a whirlwind at [his] back." Spinoza confirmed Bok's own doubts about the existence of the anthropomorphic God of the tradition and offered him an alternative conception. When he is first questioned by the (sympathetic) Investigating Magistrate, Yakov explains his understanding of Spinoza's views as follows:

> ...what I think it means is that [Spinoza] was out to make a free man out of himself -- as much as one can according to his philosophy...by thinking things through and connecting everything up...
>
> Maybe it's that God and Nature are one and the same, and so is man, or some such thing, whether he's poor or rich. If you understand that a man's mind is a

> part of God, then you understand it as well as I. In that way you're free, if you're in the mind of God. If you're there, you know it. (76-77)

When the Investigating Magistrate asks how there can be freedom if everything is bound to Necessity, Yakov explains:

> That's in your thought, your honor, if your thought is in God. That's if you believe in this kind of God; that's if you reason it out. It's as if a man flies over his own head on the wings of reason, or some such thing. You join the universe and forget your worries. (77)

Readers of Studia Spinozana will recognize in these colorful phrases a fledgling understanding of the basics of Spinoza's views. At first, though, the fixer does not understand how the ideas of Spinoza can be of help to him in his predicament:

> During the endless empty days, to forget his misery a little, the fixer tried to remember things he had read. He remembered incidents from Spinoza's life: how the Jews had cursed him in the synagogue; how an assassin had tried to kill him in the street, for his ideas...He had died young, poor and persecuted, yet one of the freest of men. He was free in his thoughts, his understanding of necessity, and in the construction of his philosophy. The fixer's thoughts added nothing to his freedom; it was nil. Necessity freed Spinoza and imprisoned Yakov. Spinoza thought himself into the universe but Yakov's poor thoughts were enclosed in a cell. (206)

This passage describes the fixer's ruminations relatively early in his imprisonment. In the course of the rest of the novel Yakov has occasion to refine his grasp of Spinoza's views as he learns how to apply them to his own precarious and painful position.

For example, on a number of occasions, Yakov thinks about the differences between the traditional conception of God and that of Spinoza. He finds it impossible to believe in the "huffing-puffing God who tries to sound like a human being," who "appears out of clouds, cyclones, burning bushes, talking." (241) That God, who talks so much in the Bible, never talked to him, and Yakov figures he doesn't need God if God will not appear. During a visit in prison, Schmuel, his more orthodox father-in-law, urges him to pray in spite of God's silence: "If you don't hear His voice, so let Him hear yours. `When prayers go up, blessings descend.'" Yakov's reply bitterly sums up his view of the matter:

> Scorpions descend, hail, fire, sharp rocks, excrement. For that I don't need God's help, the Russians are enough. All right, once I used to talk to him and answer myself, but what good does it do if I know so little in the first place? ... That's the way I look at it now. (258)

Yakov is prepared to accept that Spinoza's conception of God is closer to the truth, but such a God seems to him at this point to be of no more value than a non-existent Jehovah. What good does it do the imprisoned fixer to know that there is a singular unitary substance which manifests itself in lawlike ways as the whole of nature? As Yakov Bok sees it, he is in need of a God who will step in and improve things -- not a God whose necessary nature has inexorably determined the fixer to be imprisoned for a crime he did not commit.

> Spinoza's God ... is the eternal infinite idea of God as discovered in all of nature. This one says nothing; either he can't talk or he has no need to...(241). Nature invented itself and also man. Whatever was there was there to begin with. Spinoza said so. When it comes down to basic facts, either God is our invention and can't do anything about it, or he's a force in nature but not in history. A force is not a father. He's a cold wind, and try and keep warm. To tell the truth, I've written him off as a dead loss. (258)

Yakov knows that Spinoza found some comfort and joy in his God, but such comfort seems unavailable to the fixer. "Spinoza had reasoned him out, but Yakov Bok can't. He is, after all, no philosopher." (241) At this stage, the lack of a believable personal God seems to the fixer to rob his suffering of any meaning that it might otherwise have. "So he [Yakov] suffers without either the intellectual idea of God, or the God of the covenant...Nobody suffers for him, and he suffers for no one except himself." (241)

These last words attest to the fixer's overwhelming sense of isolation and alienation. He has no way of accounting for his miserable position except that he is simply unlucky. And, as he says, the unfathomable course of events in the world seems like a cold wind before which one must try to protect oneself. Bewildered and dejected, he feels himself utterly powerless in facing the inscrutable forces arrayed against him.

By the end of the novel, Bok realizes that his conception of himself and his place in the world has been woefully inadequate. A series of events leads to his becoming more aware of the overall political situation in Russia, of which his imprisonment is but a single manifestation. In one instance, Bibikov, the Investigating Magistrate who is trying to help Yakov, tells him of the strong evidence implicating the dead child's mother in the murder. He also relates the fact that, in spite of the exculpating evidence, he, Bibikov, is under political pressure to agree to an indictment of Yakov. As the political nature of the situation begins to dawns upon Yakov, he says: "So that's how it is...Behind the world lies another world." (171) Later another attorney explains the situation in more detail:

> "In a sick country every step to health is an insult to those who live on its sickness. .....They persecute every minority -- Poles, Finns, Germans ...but especially [the Jews]. Popular discontent they divert into anti-Semitic outbreaks. It's a simple solution to their problems. Also, they enjoy themselves because with the government's help they murder Jews, and it's good for business. (309)

When the fixer realizes that the authorities have motives other than a disinterested desire for truth and justice, the situation which had seemed absurd suddenly makes much more sense. The Investigating Magistrate confirms that there are regularities of human nature underlying Yakov's plight:

> The French have a saying, `The more it changes, the more it remains the same.' You must admit that there may be a certain truth to that, especially with reference to what we call `society.' In effect it has not changed in its essentials from what it was in the dim past, even though we tend loosely to think of civilization as progress. (173)

This reference to underlying and unchanging regularities of human behavior brings Spinoza's ideas to mind, but the fixer is not yet able to see the relationship. As noted above, Yakov thinks of Spinoza's God as a force in nature, but not in history. That history is itself a natural process, amenable to causal explanation, is an idea which is not yet clear to him. He understands that there is a "world behind this world," but does not yet see the countenance of Spinoza's God of natural order behind the confused and often seemingly opaque veil of history.

One thing which hinders the fixer's efforts to understand his situation is his initial tendency to view himself as an isolated individual -- as a narrow locus of personalized misfortune. He asks "Why me?" and seeks an answer in terms of his own specific individual characteristics. Needless to say, no such answer is to be found. He consciously tries to dissociate himself from Jews, taken as a community, and curses them for their own history: "What was being a Jew but an everlasting curse? He was sick of their history, destiny, blood guilt..." (227) But of course "their" history is his history -- a realization which comes slowly to Yakov, as he continues to seek explanations in terms of his own personal fate.

Gradually, however, he realizes that he is both a product of history and an involved agent in history. As such, it makes no sense to think of himself as an isolated individual. His personal history is inseparable from that of the Jews and of Russia herself:

> Once you leave [the shtetl] you're out in the open; it rains and snows. It snows history, which means what happens to somebody starts in a web of events outside the personal. It starts of course before he gets there. We're all in history, that's sure, but some are more than others, Jews more than some....He had, to his painful surprise, stepped into history more deeply than others -- it had worked out so. (314)

The emphasis upon history here may not sound very Spinozistic, but the basic point relates to the interconnectedness and mutual causal determination of things -- a deeply Spinozistic theme. Late in the novel we find him still asking "Why me?" but the answer is very different now: "Each time he answered his question he answered it differently. He saw it as part of his personal fate -- his various shortcomings and mistakes -- but also as force of circumstance, **though how you separated one from the other -- if one really could -- was beyond him**." (314, emphasis added)

Ceasing to think of himself as a lone bearer of bad luck, Yakov begins to identify with others who have suffered. To his captors, he is simply a Jew, and the fixer realizes that this fact imposes responsibilities as well as offering opportunities. At one point he is contemplating suicide to end his sufferings, but he thinks of his old father-in-law, Schmuel. He dreams that he sees Schmuel dead, and awakes saying "Live, Schmuel... let me die for you...

> Then he thinks in the dark, how can I die for him if I take my life? He may even die for my death if they work up a pogrom in celebration of it. If so what do I get by dying, outside of release from pain? What have I earned if a single Jew dies because I did? Suffering I can gladly live without. I hate the taste of it, but if I must suffer, let it be for something. Let it be for Schmuel. (273)

This is no longer the Yakov Bok who recently cursed the Jews and "their" history. This is no longer the character of whom it was said that he "suffers for no one except himself."

Understanding better the relationships among things, he knows "that there is no way of keeping the consequences of his death to himself. To the goyim what one Jew is is what they all are. If the fixer stands accused of murdering one of their children, so does the rest of the tribe." (273)

III. From the first moment he is arrested, the authorities try to induce him to "confess" his crime. At first, it is vaguely said that things will "go easier" for him if he confesses. Yakov refuses. Later, he is told that he personally will not bear the brunt of the criminal prosecution if he will just inform the authorities which group of religious extremists or Zionist revolutionaries paid him to commit the murder. Again, of course, he refuses. Finally, in a powerful and effective scene, the authorities inform the fixer that he is to be released as part of a general pardon of certain classes of prisoners issued by the Tsar in honor of the three-hundredth anniversary of the rule of the House of Romanov. Upon realizing that he is to be pardoned as if he were a criminal, Yakov refuses to accept. "Yakov said he wanted a fair trial, not a pardon. If they ordered him to leave the prison without a trial they would have to shoot him first." (294)

More than any other event in the novel, this shows the extent to which the fixer has grown in the course of his imprisonment. As the months and years have passed without a formal indictment's being issued, Yakov has come to understand that the case against him is very weak -- so weak, in fact, that the prosecutor would like to avoid taking the case to trial at all, for fear that the fixer might be acquitted. The offer of pardon is a further confirmation of this fact. But the fixer now understands much more than he did about how the "world behind this world" works. Knowing this, he knows too that he is not just a helplessly passive victim of the inscrutable fates.

Early in the novel, Yakov sincerely claims that he has nothing to do with politics. "I'm not a political person. The world's full of it, but it's not for me. Politics is not in my nature." (45) After two years of imprisonment he knows better. "One thing I've learned, ... there's no such thing as an unpolitical man, especially a Jew. You can't be one without the other, that's clear enough." (335) He knows that the rule of law provides at least something of a bulwark against the forces of complete tyranny, and that it is important that the ill-considered and preposterous charge against him be revealed as the groundless, reactionary anti-Semitic slander that it is. Thus it is more important to him that the case come to trial than that he be granted immediate release. And he recognizes that, given the interlocking web of historical and political reality, there is no way to keep the consequences of his actions to himself. Nor indeed would he want to, for he has accepted his role as a protagonist in the specific historical drama in which he finds himself. The final sentences of the novel depict Yakov's thoughts as he is carried in a well-secured coach to his trial. He daydreams that he has a talk with the Tsar, at the end of which he calmly puts a bullet through His Majesty's heart. A few minutes later he thinks to himself "What is it Spinoza says? If the state acts in ways that are abhorrent to human nature it's the lesser evil to destroy it. Death to the anti-Semites! Long live revolution! Long live liberty!" (335)

In his earlier capsule-summary of Spinoza's ideas, Yakov had suggested that Spinoza "was out to make a free man out of himself ...by thinking things through and connecting everything up..." Though Yakov says of himself that he is "no philosopher," he has in fact taken long steps toward his own liberation by thinking things through and coming to understand the ways in everything is connected up. Moreover, in doing so he has won for himself, in a deeply Spinozistic way, the "new life" which he set out to find. In his relationship to others, to his

own heritage, and to the state in which he lives, he is indeed a new man. The very process of coming to understand that which he was and his place in the larger whole has resulted in a change -- a change from passive suffering to active agency. Though the final scene of the novel depicts him still behind bars, and though the reader has no way of knowing what will be the verdict in his trial, he is well on his way to being free. He has not, perhaps, "[flown] over his own head on the wings of reason," but he has indeed achieved a much broader and more elevated perspective than he had before. And he has not, perhaps, "joined the universe and forgotten his worries." But he has indeed embraced that part of the universe which is his own historical and political context, and "his worries," more adequately understood, are now altogether less oppressive.

IV. Malamud's treatment of Spinozistic ideas is subtle and seldom heavy-handed. The fixer's articulation of Spinoza's views is usually comical, and he often remains puzzled about these ideas even as his own life exhibits their truth. The Fixer is not a novel **about** Spinoza. It is a novel about racism and about one poor schnook's development from an ignorant and cowering victim of circumstance to an active and insightful opponent of tyranny. Spinoza's life provides Yakov Bok with inspiration; Spinoza's ideas provide a framework for his own efforts to "think things through and connect everything up." And Spinoza's account of liberation through understanding helps the reader to comprehend the transformation taking place in the character of the fixer.

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