

it has been much easier to portray the private consciousness in fiction than to render public events. In the thirties some writers dealing with a victim like Bok would have concentrated on the system oppressing him or the hail of naturalistic facts beating him down. Our fiction tends to focus on the man's consciousness of his experience. There is a gain in comprehending the individual; there is a loss in understanding how his fate is shaped by his society. Malamud never does establish the connections with history and revolution which he claims to have established; connections (it is perhaps unfair to point out) that many intellectual Jews of Bok's generation would have made very easily. Maybe it is symptomatic of our times that *The Fixer* struggles toward a statement of everybody's complicity in politics. If so, the fact that the novel takes place in an imaginary Russia and the fact that its real triumph is a portrait of an individual suggest that Malamud still shares the traditional inability of American writers to imagine society intelligently.

In his Jewish stories, Malamud has shown himself to be a gifted, expressive writer, working small. And his best novels have been in something of a minor key, too. *The Assistant*, his masterpiece so far, is surely one of the finest novels of the decade, yet it achieves its greatness through indirection. In *The Assistant* and *A New Life* he has raided on the borders of the sentimental to produce a fiction dense with human meanings; his compassionate vision of life as it is lived from day to day compares well with the thinner efforts of colder literary craftsmen who focus on the random moment, the shifting weather of states of consciousness, or the private testimony of the senses. But it is also plain that he chafes at the limits within which he succeeds so well. *The Natural* and the weaker new novel, *The Fixer*, reveal an excess of intent, a desire to do things on a grand scale that has not been altogether fruitful. Still, as one of the country's most accomplished writers, he has earned the right to gamble on his ambitions.

IN THE WINTER OF MY THIRTY-EIGHTH YEAR

BY W. S. MERWIN

It sounds unconvincing to say *When I was young*
Though I have long wondered what it would be like
To be me now
No older at all it seems from here
As far from myself as ever

Waking in fog and rain and seeing nothing
I imagine all the clocks have died in the night
Now no one is looking I could choose my age
It would be younger I suppose so I am older
It is there at hand I could take it
Except for the things I think I would do differently
They keep coming between they are what I am
They have taught me little I did not know when I was young

There is nothing wrong with my age now probably
It is how I have come to it
Like a thing I kept putting off as I did my youth

There is nothing the matter with speech
Just because it lent itself
To my uses

Of course there is nothing the matter with the stars
It is my emptiness among them
While they drift farther away in the invisible morning

Copyright of Atlantic Magazine Archive is the property of Atlantic Monthly Group LLC and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.