

What's Wrong with the Stomach Specialist: The Ethics of Stomach Disorder in Bernard Malamud's "The Magic Barrel"

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I. HATING THE STOMACH DOCTOR

Bernard Malamud was a man of habits and routines. His writerly customs at once reflected his lifestyle and formed an integral part of his artistic achievement. An examination of his narratives in the light of such routines may, therefore, help us bring to light traits that would otherwise be left unnoticed, and I believe his short story "The Magic Barrel" will provide a particularly relevant case. What I aim to show in this essay is that an investigation into the story from such a perspective will reveal behind the novelist's attitude toward food and illness, a complex mechanism of the mind that can be called "ethics."

In *My Father Is a Book*, a memoir by Malamud's daughter Janna Malamud Smith, the portrayals of the novelist confirm the images one is likely to have after reading his stories. His life seems to be true to what we expect from the professional rigor of his style, exhibiting a meticulous attention to detail, a trait that is also registered in his careful revising process (Dessner). A hardworking man, Malamud kept regular hours and was determined to shut out intruders. Despite his workload at Oregon

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State University, for instance, where he taught freshman composition and creative writing until he was promoted to associate professor in 1958, he managed to lead a virtually reclusive life, with colleagues curiously eavesdropping to find out what was taking place in his office. As one of his friends from Oregon, Chester Garrison, recalls, his timetable was observed strictly and interruptions of any sort were not allowed.

On Monday, Wednesday, Friday, he taught and had office hours. On Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, he reached his office at 9 A.M. and began to write. He sat on an upright wooden chair drawn up to a small table or desk. . . . He has said that from three hours' work, he was lucky to get one page done. Members of the staff on either side of him had to accustom themselves to hearing through the thin walls his voice notably raised as he tested out phrasing and dialogue to get them right. The neighbors knew that any interference would not be appreciated. From time to time they even listened and tried to make out what Bern could be up to. Also, he kept his door shut tight—probably locked—and his response to a persistent knocker (raider in his opinion) was through a partially opened door. I think I remember that for a necessary communication, I once yelled through the door. (Smith 133)

His carefulness as a writer was thus applied to his daily routine as well. He knew that steady practice is essential to output, and his daily life was programmed in accordance with this necessity.

This does not necessarily mean, however, that he was unaware of the care one needs to take of one's physical and mental condition. In a letter to Arlene Hayman, his mistress who apparently also had a stomach ulcer, he preached the importance of relaxation.

I'm sorry to hear about the ulcer. It's clear that you've been working much too hard. . . . You ought to let down at Yaddo . . . even though the place is massive and lonely at the beginning, and people take to working at night in order to contain or forget it. If I were you I'd quit at 4:30 at latest and go for a swim. Put on your Bikini and let the boys admire your new slimness. And don't work at night—read, go for a walk or to town for a movie, talk to people, play croquet—get someone to teach you how if you don't know. (Smith 203)

It may look as if he is just being sympathetic to his girlfriend and eager for her to do everything she can to improve her situation. But, in fact, his "If I were you . . ." contains more than a grain of truth. His own

account to his friend Rosemarie Beck about his daily routine shows the kind of attention he pays to the state of his health.

You want to know what I do. In the morning half a mile to work: at one I go [to] the college for the mail, then walk home. I eat lunch and look at the paper. At two I walk to work. At about four-thirty I quit. I do an errand or two and walk back home. I read the mail and if I'm tired I go sleep. All winter I wasn't tired, and now that spring has come I am. We eat: I listen to a record or two; I sit in my chair and read. (Smith 134)

While he admired Hemingway-style masculine boldness, he also knew that he was not that sort of writer. His daughter calls him a “galoshes kind of guy,” after an episode in which a lady he was infatuated with mocked him for wearing rubber galoshes on a slushy winter night (211). Far from being a Hemingway or a JFK—figures Malamud saw as classic machos—he was a man who would meekly listen to what the doctor told him to do, even willingly modifying his behaviors around food (245).

It may be interesting to reconsider at this point why, despite his affairs, Malamud never left his family. The author of the memoir, his daughter, ascribes his restraint to his “sense of virtue”: “Whether or not home held him fondly enough, had he contemplated a departure, he likely would have felt daunted by the guilt he'd bear, the stark violation of his sense of virtue” (194). Her view may hold to some extent, but her own phrasing that follows the quoted passage seems to betray what lies behind his behavior: “He no doubt recalled his experience after moving to Oregon, when he'd watched his brother collapse and his father die. I imagine that, whatever his feelings, he lacked the stomach to risk initiating such damage again” (195). That “he lacked the stomach” suggests, metaphorically, he did not have the desire or courage to do anything disgraceful; but it may literally mean that his stomach, or his body, was not up to such a challenge.

Malamud is known to have suffered from stomach ulcers. His heart problem, which eventually cost him his life, also forced him to be cautious about what he ate. While it is certainly an exaggeration to say that he severely suffered from any chronic illness, he was not robust enough to forget about his physical condition, something more or less reflected in his attitude toward daily routines. We also need to recall that his family had a history of mental disorder.

In the following sections, I investigate Malamud's attitude toward illness as represented in "The Magic Barrel," one of his most celebrated stories. I particularly focus on issues that relate to eating. There are a number of eating scenes in the story, while metaphors of food are used with fine nuance.¹ Of special interest to us is what the protagonist, the rabbinical student Leo Finkle, says about the stomach doctor at a critical moment. By examining this statement, we can find out how the author's ambivalence about his less-than-robust body is linked to what many critics point to as the peculiarly Malamudian quality, shown not only in "The Magic Barrel" but also in his other works, that is, a subtle blending of the real and the fantastic.

As Jeffrey Helterman puts it, "almost all of Malamud's fiction is fable. In such fiction all talk tends to become philosophical and all action symbolic. The characters tend to have symbolic dreams, metaphors become as real as the things they describe, and actions turn into rituals" (16). Such mythical illusoriness is often combined in Malamud with quotidian banality, as is vividly shown in "The Magic Barrel" through the eating habits of the marriage broker Pinye Salzman, whom Finkle calls in to find a wife for himself. Many critics agree that Salzman, an ambiguous figure who behaves like a priest on some occasions and on other exhibits the greed, misery, and pathos of a money-seeking poor salesman, is "an insoluble mixture of the preternatural and the prosaic, ethereal mentor and plebeian hustler"(Sloan 51).² Adopting a Jungian interpretation, Charles E. May sees Salzman as a trickster "who symbolizes the instinctual and irrational, driven by the basic needs of sex and hunger" (94). May argues that "Salzman's constant hunger for fish is a reflection of Finkle's own libido hunger for sexuality, but no matter how much Salzman eats he starves, becoming 'transparent to the point of vanishing,' until Finkle finally establishes the level of his real need and accepts the wholly sexual Stella," Salzman's infamous daughter (94). The argument is convincing, and there is little doubt about Salzman's bringing to light some hidden aspect of Finkle's inner life. But he is not the only joker. I would like to suggest in the following discussion that the stomach doctor, who remains an obscure figure all the way through and never really takes part in the main plot of the story, is in fact equally essential to the Malamudian subtle balancing of the real and the mythical. For the profession of stomach specialist may constitute a key element in the mechanism of the mind that the protagonist struggles with in the story.

II. FOOD AND HABITS

There is a passage in "The Magic Barrel" where Finkle brings into focus the stomach, and in a very negative manner. In response to the query of the marriage broker as to the reason why Finkle does not like the client he recommends, he replies, "Because I detest the stomach specialist" (138). Since the exchange follows Salzman's rather disingenuous business practice in which he conceals the client's problem, some may say that the reference is a mere passing remark, but I would like to show that it is much more significant than it appears. An analysis of the implications of the remark will help us understand how, at the deeper level of the story, the ethics of eating is problematized.

"The Magic Barrel" is a story about an arranged marriage. For Salzman, the marriage broker, match-making is a business: it has to be carried out on a thoroughly material basis. The female clients are classified on cards, not by their appearance or character, but mainly by the amount of money they bring with them. On the cards, the information about the client is itemized.

Sophie P. Twenty-four years. Widow one year. No children. Educated high school and two years college. Father promises eight thousand dollars. Has wonderful wholesale business. Also real estate. On the mother's side comes teachers, also one actor. Well known on Second Avenue. (136)

The itemized information from Salzman's cards sounds at once objective and heartless; what he provides is a mechanical listing of conditions that may or may not benefit his client Finkle. But the very lack of humanized interest reinforces the almost prophetic authority of the words. They are even reminiscent of Grecian oracular messages, in which paucity is converted into divine impenetrability. The items on Salzman's cards do not produce a fluent argument, but sometimes the fewer the words are, the more influential they sound. Ironically, for Finkle, who is about to finish his course as a rabbinical student, the cards from the commercial marriage broker take on a mystical aura, while he himself is reduced to a sentimental humanist who asks nonessential questions such as "Do you keep photographs of your clients?" thus betraying his interest in the person rather than her material conditions.

This is a development not acceptable to Finkle. He resists it by finding fault with each of Salzman's clients. The first one he does not like

because she is a widow. The second, because of her age. When they reach the third one, however, Finkle starts to show interest.

“Did you say nineteen?” Leo asked with interest.

“On the dot.”

“Is she attractive?” He blushed. “Pretty?”

Salzman kissed his fingertips. “A little doll. On this I give you my words. Let me call the father tonight and you will see what means pretty.” (137)

That she is nineteen appeals to Finkle, though the fact also makes him skeptical, and he cannot help remarking, “I don’t understand why an American girl her age should go to a marriage broker.” To this, Salzman’s answer is the father: “He wants she should have the best, so he looks around himself. . . . This makes a better marriage than if a young girl without experience takes for herself.” But the answer fails to convince Finkle, who then gives away his belief in romantic love: “But don’t you think this young girl believes in love?” Now it is the marriage broker, rather than the future rabbi, who has to point soberly to the communal principle of love: “Love comes with the right person, not before.” The irony is clear here, as it is the kind of statement we expect from a rabbi.

The episode is given a further twist, however, when Finkle finally inquires about her health. As a matter of fact, the girl happens to have a problem with one of her legs. Salzman is obviously less than honest in not informing Finkle about her disability until the moment when they have almost reached an agreement, and, naturally, Finkle wants to claim his right to be difficult at this point, not necessarily because the beautiful girl is lame, but because Salzman turns out to be untrustworthy. Finkle now recalls one of the conditions listed on the card, the fact that the girl’s father is a stomach doctor.

Leo got up heavily and went to the window. He felt curiously bitter and upbraided himself for having called in the marriage broker. Finally, he shook his head.

“Why not?” Salzman persisted, the pitch of his voice rising.

“Because I detest stomach specialists.”

“So what do you care what is his business? After you marry her do you need him? Who says he must come every Friday night in your house?” (138)

This is the passage I would like to focus on. Why is Finkle so negative about the stomach specialist? Indeed, we cannot take literally what he

says about his dislike of the profession. His remark is a culmination of a series of exchanges in which Salzman has continued to disappoint Finkle, particularly the one in which he misleads Finkle by not telling him everything about the girl's physical condition. The remark is part of an expression of Finkle's exasperation; it can be about anything, provided that it lets him disagree with Salzman. But if it can be about anything, then why does he pick up on the father's profession? Why does Finkle suddenly jump to the idea of not liking a stomach specialist?

I would like to suggest that the reference is by no means arbitrary. There are actually a number of scenes in "The Magic Barrel" in which the narrative highlights the stomach. The first moment comes in the opening section when Salzman arrives smelling of fish:

Salzman, who had been long in the business, was of slight but dignified build, wearing an old hat, and an overcoat too short and tight for him. He smelled frankly of fish, which he loved to eat, and although he was missing a few teeth, his presence was not displeasing, because of an amiable manner curiously contrasted with mournful eyes. (134)

Here, Salzman's habit of eating fish is linked to his physical meagerness. In the West, meat eating has traditionally been seen as a masculine act, while vegetarianism is often considered feminine (Adams ch. 1). Fish does not easily fit into such a meat/vegetable dichotomy, and the suggestion of an immigrant background should not be missed, but the description above suggests that Salzman's eating habits are more-or-less consistent with his lack of bodily strength. Salzman is presented as someone who does not put priority on meat, which renders him less masculine than those who do. That he is missing a few teeth may also be relevant, for we do not need to consult the Freudian symbolism of teeth to imagine his possible sexual dysfunction resulting from the deterioration of his health. And, of course, if you lose teeth, you have problems chewing meat, while the difficulty can be less serious with fish.

Salzman claims he has piles of cards at home with records of important information about his clients, particularly information about the fathers. He selects six from the piles for Finkle, but he never discloses what the standard is. That one of the fathers is a stomach specialist, while another is a dentist, may provide a clue as to what the hidden standard is:

Lily H. High school teacher. Regular. Not a substitute. Has savings and new Dodge car. Lived in Paris one year. Father is a successful dentist thirty-five years. Interested in professional man. Well-Americanized family. Wonderful opportunity. (136)

This “successful dentist” might be the one Salzman consults for his own teeth problems, if he visits one at all, but, more important, the dentist can be part of a larger constellation of metaphors that cluster around the act of eating.

The most memorable scene of eating in the story comes after Finkle’s successive refusals to accept Salzman’s proposals. After he dismisses Salzman, Finkle gets depressed for reasons he is not quite sure of. He manages to recover from his low mood by the end of the day by devoting himself to reading, but Salzman mysteriously arrives at Finkle’s door as if to answer his need, which only Salzman realizes. The timing seems to be wrong at first, for Finkle is in no mood to listen to the news Salzman brings. It is at this point that the marriage broker starts to eat:

“Please, Mr. Salzman, no more.”

“But first must come back my strength,” Salzman said weakly. He fumbled with the portfolio straps and took out of the leather case an oily paper bag, from which he extracted a hard, seeded roll and a small smoked whitefish. With a quick motion of his hand he stripped the fish out of its skin and began ravenously to chew. “All day in a rush,” he muttered. (139)

This is one of the most detailed descriptions of action in this short story. Salzman’s handling of his food is described with shrewd observation of his fastidiousness, which appears as a comical obsession, while the modesty of the package and Salzman’s unexplained determination to eat are also indicative, when combined, of a certain mystical force. The frugal meal is not only a sign of meanness and poverty; its simplicity creates an atmosphere of ritualistic serenity, which is why Finkle feels forced to sit and watch the marriage broker finish his food.

Leo watched him eat.

“A sliced tomato you have maybe?” Salzman hesitantly inquired.

“No.” (139)

The scene is bizarre, with the visitor avidly consuming his own food, while the host just watches with a quizzical gaze. What actually takes

place at this moment is a conflict between two readings of the act of eating: bringing in a meal to eat in front of his client is a demonstrative gesture that is meant to exhibit Salzman's priestly power with its association with the Eucharist, while Finkle, the future rabbi, refuses to acknowledge Salzman's authority. Salzman wants to elevate eating to something meaningful, perhaps to a symbolic ritual for reconciliation; but Finkle resists the offer.

Somehow, however, Salzman has his way, and by the time he has eaten up what he has brought with him, he seems to have gained the upper hand and manages to get Finkle to do what he wants him to do.

The marriage broker shut his eyes and ate. When he had finished he carefully cleaned up the crumbs and rolled up the remains of the fish, in the paper bag. His spectacled eyes roamed the room until he discovered, amid some piles of books, a one-burner gas stove. Lifting his hat he humbly asked, "A glass tea you got, rabbi?"

Conscience-stricken, Leo rose and brewed the tea. He served it with a chunk of lemon and two cubes of lump sugar, delighting Salzman.

After he had drunk his tea, Salzman's strength and good spirits were restored. (139)

This is a curiously quotidian scene, but what is working behind it is a manipulative power, and the magic comes from eating. Salzman's meager food and his fastidious manner of eating may simply seem to mark out how suspicious his business conduct is at first, but Finkle is now ready to accept whatever the marriage broker is going to propose. The ritual has done the trick.

The act of eating is thus given a symbolic role in "The Magic Barrel." With a rabbinical student at center stage, Judaism is clearly under focus in many parts of the story, particularly when Finkle confesses to Lily, "I came to God not because I loved Him but because I did not" (142). The emphasis here is on the spiritual aspect, but the marriage broker's occasional references to their Jewish background, through expressions such as "Yiddish kindler" (140) and "ghetto" (144), direct our attention to the communal side of Judaism and remind us of the close relation between food and religion. Regulations about what one eats often constitute an essential part of religious practice, and Judaism is no exception. But what is important to note here is that, while the act of eating quoted above takes on a semimystical air, there is an inherently comic element in

Salzman's eccentric behavior, which is emphasized, for instance, by his habit of keeping smelly fish in his briefcase. Eating can be sacred, but it can also direct our eyes to the sordid reality of our daily life, where food is associated with dirtier facts, such as human greed, folly, and misery.

This partly explains why, when Finkle discovers that Salzman lied to Miss Lily Hirschorn before he was introduced to her, his despair takes the form of a daydream filled with images of food.

Lily wilted. Leo saw a profusion of loaves of bread go flying like ducks high over his head, not unlike the winged loaves by which he had counted himself to sleep last night. Mercifully, then, it snowed, which he would not put past Salzman's machinations. (142)

The image of the winged loaves, a parody of Christ's feeding of the multitude in the New Testament, is not a mere profanation of the sacred.⁴ As a matter of fact, only through such a caricature—of food “flying like ducks”—can we capture Salzman's false priesthood. Salzman desecrates whatever is sacred to Finkle: he keeps on calling Finkle “rabbi,” when he is not yet officially one, while warning him against a romantic belief in love by reminding him of Judaic teachings on communal love. At one moment he insists on the profitability of marriage, while at another he prioritizes the beauty of his clients. His claim of priestly authority is thus based on willful confusion of the sacred and the secular, a trick that may well be embodied in the ugly image of the angelic bread that “go flying like ducks” (142) as well as in the confusion of Judaism and Christianity.

As the story gears up toward the climax, the ambivalent meaning of food is given a further twist. Salzman meets Finkle twice, but neither of the sessions leads to a success. The sense of letdown Finkle experiences after he meets Lily is particularly strong. But Salzman shows up for a third time, this time with a manila packet with photographs of his female clients. He has lost weight and looks ill. Finkle refuses to listen to him, and Salzman disappears. It is not until some time has passed—probably some weeks—that Finkle finally grabs the packet left on the table by Salzman.

On the table was the packet. With a sudden relentless gesture he tore it open. For a half hour he stood by the table in a state of excitement, examining the photographs of the ladies Salzman had included. Finally, with a deep sigh he put them down. There were six, of varying degrees of attractiveness, but look

at them long enough and they all became Lily Hirschorn: all past their prime, all starved behind bright smiles, not a true personality in the lot. Life, despite their frantic yoo-hooings, had passed them by; they were pictures in a briefcase that stank of fish. (145)

The image of the emotionally starving women, who fail to find their partner while in their prime, may be conventional; but what makes it a penetrating image is the smell of the fish.

“The Magic Barrel” is a story about human desires, not only sexual, but also economic, religious, and even aesthetic. The food metaphor reveals the inevitable darker side of these desires, for in most cases they are left unfulfilled, condemning people to a state of emotional starvation. But the stinking fish suggests more than that. The dichotomy is not only the one between fulfillment and starvation. The stinking briefcase records what happened in the past: the smell is a residue of what *was* in there. What stinks is the past, the irremediable time that is already gone and cannot be retrieved. Food usually goes bad as time passes in a process that demonstrates how vulnerable we are in the flow of time. The smell is a warning sign that the food is no longer good. There seems to be a nexus of ideas here: the past, rotten food, disease, the sense of loss . . . and evil. This brings us a step closer to the question of the stomach specialist.

III. FOOD AND THE MIND

Malamud is known to have been preoccupied with the idea of having a possible mental disease that he may have inherited from his parents and passed on to his children. His biographer Philip Davis explains:

Given the mental instabilities in both families, but particularly on the Malamud side, what were the chances of a child inheriting a tendency for manic-depression or schizophrenia? One of the reasons that Malamud had been reading the neo-Freudians, Henry Stack Sullivan and Karen Horney, in the 1940s was that both of them rejected the idea that the schizophrenia was biologically determined and contested the view that little or nothing could be done by psychiatric means. Malamud had been worried about his own state; Ann in particular was worried about a future child, with Malamud often reluctant to talk about it; and before them both was the deteriorating example of Eugene, Malamud's younger brother. (73)

Madness was certainly a threat to Malamud, with a number of his family members showing symptoms of mental illness. Even in a short story like "The Magic Barrel" his preoccupation is manifested in the protagonist's unsteady mental condition, which often affects his daily life. Finkle's hysterical outbursts at Salzman are clearly a result of his excessive expectations, something he does not seem to understand himself. The ensuing unexplainable depression he falls into may, therefore, be a classic case of Freudian melancholy, as is explored in "Mourning and Melancholy." Freud suggests in the essay that clinical melancholy takes place when the real cause of sadness is suppressed or remains unidentified and is not appropriately mourned; in such a situation the patient's ability to cope with the loss is seriously undermined.

Madness for Malamud, however, was not a purely mental problem. In fact, it had a complicated relationship with his body. The disease that he officially suffered from was stomach ulcer; he was even exempted from military service on this basis. But, while the disease might well have come from the kind of life he led when he worked in his parent's grocery store and in this sense originates in poverty, it was not unrelated to the mental state he was in, as Philip Davis speculates.

[His stomach ulcer] was the result of nerves, as well as a long history of irregular and skimpy meals taken between customers at the back of the store, especially in the years immediately following the death of the mother. But Malamud was mortified when the local druggist said to him, out loud for all around to hear, that his stomach problems might well be psychosomatic. (60)

This is a tricky area, since it is almost impossible to draw a clear line between bodily and mental diseases. And, of course, stomach ulcer used to be considered psychosomatic, hovering in the borderline area between mind and body, and even now, despite evidence that suggests that it could be virus induced, we cannot dismiss mental stress as a mechanism of the disease, since the immune system of the body is always under the influence of the psychological element and the function of some organs, particularly digestive ones, are closely linked with the nervous system. What is evident, however, is that this kind of sickness must have accustomed Malamud not only to considering bodily symptoms in the light of mental problems but also, quite naturally, to a way of thinking that takes the opposite direction: that is, he was forced to understand mental and even spiritual matters through the language of the body.

For Malamud the body meant the stomach. For a man who had to live with his stomach problems, the act of eating was less a pleasure than a carefully regulated practice. Arguably, even his working hours were planned according to the way he ate:

His bedsit routine was firm: bed at 11.30, get up at 8.15; wash, breakfast, read *The Times*, being at work by 10 until 12.30; shave, eat, read for an hour, back at work by 2.30; quit at 5, shower perhaps, read or listen to music until 5.40 and then dress to go to teach evening class; back by 10.20, drink milk, read again, wash and go to bed. (61)

Ironically, Malamud's rigorous adherence to his routine may be a sign of his obsessive disposition and may have been a cause of, rather than a solution to, his stomach problems. Even so, such a routine must have secured a perspective from which he could see the whole matter in terms of bodily practice. This was certainly a positive turn for him, since the situation could otherwise have led to his feeling continually under the threat of an invisible psychiatric disorder, which might or might not be causing his bodily symptoms. By subordinating the mind to the body through practice, Malamud managed to get a sense that he was in control.

Indeed, such a preoccupation with habits and procedures may sometimes have proved an obstacle in his writing. There were a series of exchange between him and his future wife Ann over his drafts of an autobiographical novel entitled "The Light Sleeper," and in one of the letters, in 1944, she wrote to him:

As to your obsession with detail—is not that a reflection of your own life? Please try to minimize details—in spite of your diet.

As to the lack of an encompassing emotion, which is reflected in the dryness of some of your writing—is that also a reflection of your life? B[ernadette] remarked that your approach to love is "clinical." Quote and unquote! (63)

The novelist's obsession with "detail" may have appeared almost "clinical" in the sense of pathological as well as highly dispassionate; there could be something that lies behind all this. What Ann's letter implies is that his writing was lacking in some essential ingredient necessary for literature, just as there was something missing in his life, particularly in his relationship with Ann. Predictably, his response was harsh:

If there is one thing that I have learned from sad and bitter experience, it is that a writer should ask for no opinions until he has completed his first draft of his entire novel. For the second time my morale has been smashed, and I'm trying to put together the pieces so that I can go on without trying to recast my idea still another time. (63)

It is remarkable that his emphasis is clearly on self-control, which takes the form of an independent solitary activity tailored to his own needs. This also means that he does not want to replace his "clinical" approach with dangerous "emotion" that may lead him astray. Actually, it may be precisely because he was suspicious about unreliable states of mind that he turned to solid "detail" and rigorous control.

The concern with self-regulation is, of course, a peculiarly modern one, but, more important, this modern idea of self-regulation often has focused on illness. Combating illness became a great literary theme in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; at the center of concern was clinical melancholia, which attracted the attention of many scholars and writers.⁵ As can be seen in Robert Burton's influential *Anatomy of Melancholy*, however, melancholy was an extremely complex amalgamation of various illnesses, with different symptoms requiring varying healing regimens. It is understandable that later generations learned to take a more analytical approach by separating, rather than synthesizing, the conditions.

The mental side of melancholy was gradually taken over by the physiology of the nervous system in the nineteenth century, and by the twentieth century the word "melancholy" was no longer in medical use, having been replaced by the more clinical term "depression." Meanwhile, the bodily symptoms of melancholy were succeeded by "biliousness" and "dyspepsia,"⁶ both of which conditions involved digestive problems that caused sickness and vomiting, but, as Hisao Ishizuka explains, the former was under the spotlight in the 1820s, while the latter was brought into focus in the latter half of the century (129). Thomas Carlyle was one of the first authors who "discovered" dyspepsia; he marked out his digestive problems as a distinct illness and decided that they derive from his lifestyle, particularly his eating habits. He is known to have attempted to control his condition by sticking to a rigorous daily routine with carefully planned menus (135–40).

By the twentieth century melancholy had become less prominent as a literary motif, but its heirs could still be found in various forms. Its shadows can be traced not only in depression and neurosis, which are obvi-

ously mental in their symptoms and origins, but also in more bodily symptoms such as digestive illnesses. Considering that early modern understanding of melancholy was based on the classical theory of the four humors, which was based on the proportions of bodily fluids, to explain both mental and physical conditions, it should be no surprise that melancholy is still thought to have a bodily basis.

Such a synthetic nature of melancholy helped to develop its peculiar hybridity; it denoted actual conditions, on the one hand, while it also stood for a state of the mind that is sensitive to its own illnesses, better known as hypochondria. The captivating power of melancholy as a cultural force, typically shown in Burton's *Anatomy*, may, therefore, refer us back to the often-held view about the modern self, that is, that it is formulated as an agent that tries to control its own problems—whether they are economic, political, moral, aesthetic, or physical—through voluntary actions, which usually take the form of sustained practices. The hypochondriacal self, alert to its own illnesses and signs of mental instability, turns out to provide a model for the modern self-regulatory subject who is responsible for his or her own health. In fact, the very idea of modernity may well depend on the idea of the “sick self,” as Susan Sontag convincingly shows in *Illness as Metaphor; and, AIDS and Its Metaphors*.

IV. FOOD AND ILLNESS

“The Magic Barrel” is a story about desires. The characters are preoccupied with money, food, love, and marriage. More specifically, Salzman's appetite, coupled with his poverty, and Finkle's search for a bride, partly driven by a sexual need, are the main driving forces in the development of the narrative. At a deeper level, however, the story is also about illnesses. Salzman, whose clients include a stomach specialist and a dentist, probably suffers from both stomach and dental problems. It is evident from his appearance and eating habits that he is not well fed nor does he keep regular dining hours like Malamud when he worked in the grocery store, though he seems resilient despite these symptoms. His wife looks no healthier; there is even an inkling of her having a mental disorder or possibly dementia.

The illnesses Finkle suffers from are harder to determine. His pain is mental; he agonizes over the marriage issue, particularly after his meetings with the marriage broker, which often leads to anxiety and absent-mindedness.

All day he ran around in the woods—missed an important appointment, forgot to give out his laundry, walked out of a Broadway cafeteria without paying and had to run back with the ticket in his hand; had even not recognized his landlady in the street when she passed with a friend and courteously called out, “A good evening to you, Dr. Finkle.” By nightfall, however, he had regained sufficient calm to sink his nose into a book and there found peace from his thoughts. (139)

He is thus depicted as a worrying, indecisive man, who is liable to retreat to private contemplation in the face of difficulties.

Typically, his agony comes after the event. The passage quoted above follows his humiliating session with Salzman, while the one below shows his state of mind after his disappointing meeting with Lily Hirschorn:

He gradually realized—with an emptiness that seized him with six hands—that he had called in the broker to find him a bride because he was incapable of doing it himself. This terrifying insight he had derived as a result of his meeting and conversation with Lily Hirschorn. Her probing questions had somehow irritated him into revealing—to himself more than her—the true nature of his relationship to God, and from that it had come upon him, with shocking force, that apart from his parents, he had never loved anyone. (143)

The revelation is certainly shocking, but what really makes the blow unbearable is that it arrives from the past. His realization that “apart from his parents, he had never loved anyone” is devastating mainly because his fate is already sealed and the damage is irrecoverable. Things have already happened, while Finkle has never known the truth, which means he has been misreading himself and has been living on an empty, false model of the self. This proves to be much more painful than an encounter with a hostile future, as he is caught off guard; this is why he is thrown into panic.

It seemed to Leo that his whole life stood starkly revealed and he saw himself for the first time as he truly was—unloved and loveless. This bitter but somehow not fully unexpected revelation brought him to a point of panic, controlled only by extraordinary effort. He covered his face with his hands and cried. (143)

Though the scene takes place in the middle of the story, it is probably one of the most emotional moments. It is moving, shocking, and revelatory, and the eloquence of the narrative voice seems to suggest that this is a climax, even though there are further developments ahead. Perhaps what is told here is true; perhaps Finkle is really “unloved and loveless.” But it is also true that Finkle’s agony originates in his act of retrospection. What actually tortures him most is that his problems lie in the unreachable territory of the past that can never be retrieved.

Preoccupation with the past is a well-known symptom of depression. Finkle’s tendency to fall into a low mood is clear from the behaviors depicted in passages we already observed. But there is another illness that is relevant here, which is likewise past-oriented in nature. What I would like to turn to is “dyspepsia,” mentioned in the previous section, a condition that refers to various sorts of indigestion. Those who suffer from dyspepsia are told by doctors to reflect on their past follies, such as intemperate eating, for the origin of their symptoms. A virus or bacteria, an enemy from outside, is not the only cause; a person has to ponder his or her past conduct to find the real cause of the sickness, whether it is choice of food or reckless lifestyle. Thus, it is thought to be a lack of discipline and restraint that burdens the digestive organs, and since it is only after the damage is done that mistakes are recognized, it is not too much to say that dyspepsia is an illness coming from the past.

According to Gert Brieger, dyspepsia came to the attention of the medical profession in the United States in the period from 1800 to 1920, chronologically paralleling a similar move in Britain. The symptoms varied, and, as one scholar put it, they included such wide-ranging conditions as “the repleted stomach, the tired stomach, the starved stomach, the painful stomach, the hurrying stomach, the acid stomach, the bitter stomach, and last, but not least, the windy stomach” (183). While dyspepsia was considered a nerve-related illness, among its principal causes were rapidity in eating, over-eating, the use of ice water, and the use of refined white flour (183). It is easy to see from these assessments that the illness was regarded as more-or-less controllable by changes in a person’s lifestyle.

Since dyspepsia was not considered fatal, there was lack of clear data regarding the symptoms,⁷ and this further blurred the already indistinct profile of the disease. Yet there also existed a view that “dyspepsia is one of the most common, most fashionable, and most annoying nervous symptoms of our modern society” (184), which may be partly explained

by the wealth and overindulgence American people began to enjoy during this period. But it may also refer us back to the discussion regarding the genesis of the modern individual. Dyspepsia serves as a convenient model for an individual who constructs his or her subjectivity through an awareness of physical conditions. It typically highlights a lack of self-discipline and suggests the possibility of prevention through better daily practices. Failing to be alert to the imminent threat may result not only in actual illness but also in painful recognition of past imprudence.

In "The Magic Barrel" there is no clear evidence that Finkle suffers from dyspepsia, but behind his mental state seems to lie the ethics of care that is essential to the treatment of dyspepsia. Finkle suffers from the horrific decidedness of the past. He agonizes over the moment of revelation when "his whole life stood starkly revealed." Even if this is an extreme case, and Finkle, in fact, is often quick to recover from his despair, it is undeniable that he is a man peculiarly vulnerable to the menace of past mistakes; his sensitivity is reflected in his complex mixture of disgust and sympathy toward the women whose photographs he receives from Salzman; the women are sad because they all suffer from conditions that their past conduct engendered, or that is how Finkle understands it. He is horrified by their apparent despair. That the women are presented to him as candidates for his future wife is no less disturbing because he is led to imagine a situation in which he is involved in their fate.

For Finkle it seems natural that the pictures come from "a briefcase that stank of fish." The smell of the fish is relevant here for the following reasons. First, it is suggestive of a residue of something that is no longer there but that exerts a continuing influence. It is a metaphor for the past that never goes away. But the smell is by no means fragrant; the stinking smell is explicitly negative and is even indicative of repugnant bodily messes. The association is physical, while the context implies that what lies behind it is spiritual or even moral. Here Finkle—and perhaps Malamud himself—translates spiritual matter into the language of the body.

Now we can come back to the question of the stomach specialist. Finkle rather abruptly expresses his dislike of the "stomach specialist" in the early part of the story.

"Why not?" Salzman persisted, the pitch of his voice rising.

"Because I detest stomach specialists." (138)

Finkle says he cannot accept the candidate because he does not like the job of her father. This looks like a mere excuse or a casual gesture of sabotage at this point, only meant to put an end to the conversation with the marriage broker. But, in fact, Finkle's aggressive reaction is part of a bigger plot of the narrative, and it turns out to have a deeper implication.

"The Magic Barrel" was published in 1953, a date by which dyspepsia was no longer prevalent as a medical concept. But the views about digestive disorders and, more generally, a person's eating behavior did not change so quickly, as is evident from the descriptions of Salzman's eating habits. What and how a person eats continues to reveal character. What is important here is a way of thinking that relates stomach issues to something beyond, that is, something moral and even spiritual, since, as discussed, eating habits typically reveal a person's attitude toward personal discipline and practice. Thus, the narrative close-up of Salzman's ugly eating habits suggests Finkle's moral questioning of the marriage broker, his suspiciousness about his business practices.

This could mean that the stomach specialist emerges as someone who exercises moral authority. He can either blame or praise a person according to the way they have regulated their eating habits and controlled their stomach conditions. His assessments are retrospective: he investigates a patient's conduct and explains current conditions as inevitable results of past folly.

It is against this possible priestly authority of the stomach specialist that Finkle shows his hatred. He is annoyed, not only because the stomach specialist is likely to question his rabbinical status by offering himself as an alternative moral authority, though that is not irrelevant. More important, his hatred is directed toward the amphibious nature of the profession, which converts the physical into the mental and vice versa. We can recall here how Malamud was mortified when a local druggist suggested that his stomach ulcer might be psychosomatic. A suggestion that his symptoms might be partly mental was upsetting for him because it obscured the boundary between body and mind.

In fact, blurring of the boundary is what Malamud resorts to himself, rhetorically, at crucial moments, as is manifestly shown in a passage like "they were pictures in a briefcase that stank of fish." The crossing of the border between body and mind is actually an inevitable part of "The Magic Barrel," a development that Finkle tries to resist but eventually succumbs to. He wants to separate the physical and the spiritual, which

is probably why he is not willing to help Salzman consume his package of food during their sessions and despises his smelly briefcase; but he is by no means free from the way of thinking the stomach specialist relies on. The stomach specialist would point his finger to the past deeds of the patient in a judgmental manner, while authoritatively prescribing self-regulation to prevent a similar occurrence in the future. He shows that this is how one is supposed to compensate for the loss, that is, by capitalizing on the experience to anticipate and prevent another potential loss. This is a way of thinking Finkle seems to share, as is shown in his preoccupation with the irremediable past.

As long as he keeps separate the mind and the body, he will never be able to identify what he has lost in the first place. The keys to the cure of his depression can only be found in the border area between body and mind. Just as Malamud's stomach ulcer could have been caused by mental stress, the depression Finkle falls into may well come not only from his resentment against the marriage broker but from his own body, particularly his sexual frustration. When he is devastated after he realizes he has been "loveless and unloved" all his life, he still does not understand that it is his insistence on the separation of the spiritual from the physical that may have caused it.

Is the ending of the story a happy one then? It looks as if Finkle has finally met a woman, Stella, who fulfills his sexual fantasy. Salzman's prayer for the dead is ambiguous in its implication; by yielding to sexual desire, does Finkle now overcome his hatred of the stomach specialist and finally unite the physical and the spiritual? Is this a way for Finkle to control his body and mind? The answer is "yes" for Stephen Bluestone, who concludes that

Finkle forges a definitive link between his personal spiritual quest and the erotic life. Though Pinye Salzman may well have "arranged" the outcome, Finkle's selection of a bride suggests his freely taken first step on the road to sexual maturity. (407-8)

I agree with Bluestone on this point, but it is also true that, despite the union of the man and the woman, and despite the Kaddish chanting, the tone is not necessarily celebratory, since Salzman's prayer is "for the dead" (149). What we might note is that near the end Finkle continues to look backward, while not really realizing where the problems come from: "Leaving the cafeteria, he was, however, afflicted by a tormenting

suspicion that Salzman had planned it all to happen this way" (149). By thus continuing to blame Salzman for his fate, Finkle fails to have a clear perspective or a command of his own life, which is why, ironically, the broker finds him a good customer and never stop meddling in his affairs. Finkle is thus destined to be a permanent good patient; he cannot do without a godlike stomach doctor, whom he detests but must turn to in order to handle his problems for the rest of his life.

NOTES

¹ Although in this essay my discussion is mainly about "The Magic Barrel," eating scenes abound in Malamud's works. For instance, Joel Salzman has focused on how food serves as a symbol of temptation in "The Girl of My Dreams," which he reads as a Malamudian experiment with the genre of quest romance.

² See Sloan (51) for critical remarks on Salzman's ambiguous nature.

³ See Dessner (254) for how the narrative mixes the language of Orthodox Judaism with that of Christianity.

⁴ Compare: "And they say unto him, We have here but five loaves, and two fishes./ He said, Bring them hither to me./ And he commanded the multitude to sit down on the grass, and took the five loaves, and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven, he blessed, and brake, and gave the loaves to *his* disciples, and the disciples to the multitude./ And they did all eat, and were filled: and they took up of the fragments that remained twelve baskets full"(Matt. 14.17-20).

⁵ Literature on the subject abounds, but particularly useful here is Douglas Trevor's *The Poetics of Melancholy in Early Modern England*.

⁶ Melancholy, which is a result of the increase of "Black Choler," was considered to cause various bodily symptoms. Herman Boerhaave in *Aphorisms: Concerning the Knowledge and Cure of Diseases* (1735) explains how Black Choler affects bodily functions: "[H]ence it extends, gnaws, and corrupts the Vessels by its increased Bulk, its present Acrimony, and continual Motion; hence the like Destruction of the Spleen, Stomach, Pancreas, Caul, Mesentery, Intestines, and Liver . . ." (Radden 178).

⁷ "As to frequency of dyspepsia, the historian has some trouble in evaluating the data. In the first place, the data are rarely expressed in numbers because the disorder was usually not fatal, not reportable, and was for so long mired in a maze of varying nomenclature" (Brieger 184).

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