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SPECIAL ISSUE:
CONSIDERING POLITICAL COUNTER-NARRATIVES

"Why are you hiding here?": Counter-Narrating Antisemitic Master-Narratives in Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer*

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When Mendel Beilis, a Jew, was accused of having murdered a Christian child in Kyiv in 1911, the allegations drew on centuries-old "blood libel" legends, dating back to the Middle Ages, in which Jews purportedly sacrificed Christian children for ritual purposes. While Beilis eventually was acquitted of the charges, the master-narratives that drove them have proved resistant to counter-narration. Bernard Malamud's 1966 novel *The Fixer*, by fictionally attempting to retell Beilis's story through the character of Yakov Bok, provides a "critical reinterpretation […] of dominant narrative models" (Meretoja 2021)—a powerful counter-narrative, not only to the specific tale of Beilis, but also to the longer-standing claims that continue to buttress antisemitism.

Keywords:
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INTRODUCTION

When Mendel Beilis, a Jew, was accused of having murdered a Christian child in Kyiv in 1911, the accusation came in the wake of several major pogroms in the Russian Empire during the first decade of the 20th century. In addition, during

this same period the infamous tract *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a purported plot by an international "cabal" of Jews to control the world — yet clearly written by staunch antisemites, most likely in Russia — was disseminated widely throughout Europe. The accusation also drew on centuries-old "blood libel" legends, dating back to the Middle Ages, in which Jews purportedly sacrificed Christian children for ritual purposes. While Beilis eventually was acquitted of the charges, the master-narratives that drove them have proved resistant to counter-narration, even when the disseminators have been exposed as fraudulent. Bernard Malamud's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1966 novel *The Fixer*, by fictionally attempting to retell Beilis's story through the character of Yakov Bok, provides a complex historical and social context from which to view Beilis's experience. While the fictionalized version certainly takes liberties with the historical record, the fact that it actively engages with both fact and fiction, with defamation and resurrection, with history and its legacy, renders this account a powerful counter-narrative, a "critical reinterpretation […] of dominant narrative models" (Meretoja, 2021).

In order to demonstrate this, I will first provide a detailed background on the blood libel legend and other traditional narratives of Jewish complicity in nefarious deeds in order to establish the elements that constitute the master-narrative to which, I claim, Malamud's novel responds. Following this discussion, I will review some of the pertinent details of the historical Mendel Beilis's life, so that it will be clear, later in the essay, the extent to which Malamud both draws from historical fact and also bends it for his own purposes. Next, I will elaborate on some of the theoretical underpinnings of my approach to the concepts of master-narratives and counter-narratives. I will then apply these theoretical ideas to the final section of the essay, in which I demonstrate the ways that Malamud's narrative functions as a rhetorically persuasive counter-narrative, not only in opposition to the specific charges against Beilis, but also to the longer-standing claims that continue to buttress antisemitism.

THE MASTER-NARRATIVE AND MENDEL BEILIS

As noted in the introduction, *The Fixer* positions itself in opposition to the traditional master-narrative of Jewish malfeasance. In order to understand the assumptions that contributed to the prosecution of Mendel Beilis (and of his fictional counterpart, Yakov Bok), therefore, we must identify the tradition upon which those master-narratives were constructed. This section will provide a detailed overview of the primary narrative that applies in the case of Beilis, the blood libel, as well as how that story aligned with the medieval theological

conflation of Jews with the Devil. I will also briefly present some of the salient features of *The Protocols*, in light of its contribution to the climate of antisemitism that prevailed in Beilis's time. The discussion will focus, particularly, on the narrative features that made the accusations compelling for those who were inclined to believe them, and that in an important sense have elevated them over time into the larger master-narrative of Jewish conspiratorial behaviour.

The narratives that we will examine here tend to take two forms: "small narratives," in the sense meant by Lyotard (1984), involving specific actors and limited plots, and larger, "master" narratives elaborating large conspiracies and less distinct actors.[1] On the one hand, the larger narratives have perhaps been more durable due to the fact that it is difficult to challenge a villain that one cannot see "this persistence of buried master-narratives in […] our 'political unconscious,'" as Frederic Jameson describes it in a foreword to Lyotard's work (Jameson 1986, xii). By contrast, the small narratives in their extensive detail and "vitality" (Jameson 1986, xi) have provided the human content the specific actors that is often lacking in larger narratives. Indeed, both types of narratives depend on each other for their persuasiveness. Despite the relatively "limited tellability" (Hyvärinen, 2021,19) of master-narratives despite the fact that they frequently lack the elements of "proper narratives" (20) they nevertheless can be thought of as a hub or central idea that is given substance and meaning by the constellation of smaller narratives that surrounds it. For its part, "An implicit master-narrative […]," as Meretoja (2021, 37) observes, "is a narrative pattern that underlies many concrete (explicit) narratives." In this sense, the master-narrative provides broader ideological weight to the more localized focus of the small narratives, while the small narratives supply the vague contours of the master-narrative with the detailed expositional content that it typically lacks.

A particularly pernicious, recurring "small narrative" that has contributed to the larger master-narrative under discussion here is the so-called "blood libel," according to which Christian children were said to have been abducted and killed by Jews so that their blood could be used for Jewish rituals, such as the making of Passover matzos (ritual unleavened bread). This narrative belongs to a larger category of accusations often referred to as "ritual murders," with blood libel tales being one expression of that notion. The blood libel legend has had a startlingly long life, both in Europe and in other parts of the world. For native speakers of English, the most familiar narrative, perhaps, is that of "Little

[1] While my conception of "small narratives" derives in part from Lyotard, I hasten to emphasize that I have applied the term in ways that are not wedded to his theory, as I believe the discussion that follows will make clear.

St. Hugh of Lincoln" (Jacobs 1991 [1896]), which is mentioned in Chaucer's "Prioress's Tale."[2] The story of the abduction and murder of little Hugh became a sensation in 13th-century England, and led to the execution of 19 Jews who were accused of complicity in the alleged crime (Langmuir, 1972, 459). Of critical importance to the present discussion, though, is the *specificity of detail* that provided these accounts with a degree of credibility in the eyes of the English public. Indeed, the concentrated expositional content (Sternberg, 1978, 23) lends itself to the rapid engagement of readers and listeners, and to the swift dissemination of the tale to wider audiences. In addition, combining specific details while leaving significant gaps allows readers to apply the narrative to a variety of contexts a fact that provided a *ready-made template* for subsequent versions of the narrative. This verisimilitude, combined with extensive allusions to the figure of Christ and Christian religious symbols, generated a powerful response, as well as collective punishment. In addition, in some (possibly later) versions, the drawing of the victim's blood purportedly for "the making of Jewish ceremonial food" (83) plays a significant role (83-84).

Bebbington's study (1991) of the versions of this narrative is instructive in that, as the folklorist Alan Dundes notes in his introduction to the essay, the approach is a "composite" of versions of the ballad (74). Through this approach, we are able to see how the accretion of images and emphases over time lend themselves to the particular audience that it was addressing, in order to serve the ideological interests of those who later incorporated the narrative, and others like it, into their overall political discourse. In this sense, the "small narrative" quality of an individual version contributes to the "master-narrative" implications of its message. The fact that neither practice the taking of blood for ritual purposes, nor the letting of blood for ritual slaughter was actually connected to anything remotely related to Jewish religious practice (see, e.g., Teter, 2020, 39; Biale, 2007, 170; Johnson, 2012, 2) hardly mattered, for the allegations themselves served their purpose in creating an unclean, diabolical, anti-Christian Other.

The origins and endurance of this alleged alignment between Jews and the Devil gained momentum during the Middle Ages, as Christian theologians sought to discredit Judaism and Jews. The emphasis in many of these claims involved what Jeffrey R. Woolf describes as "an adumbration of the identity of the Jew with Satan" as reflected by "his alleged unflagging hatred for Christians and Christianity, his desire for vengeance against Christians […] and so on" (Woolf,

[2] For discussions of other significant blood libel narratives, see, for example, Langmuir (1991, 3-40), Johnson (2012), and Teter (2020). For a comprehensive overview of a variety of cases, see also the articles in Dundes (Ed., 1991).

2011, 50). These associations were reinforced by popular sentiments, as Joshua Trachtenberg points out in his seminal *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (1943): "If it is possible for demagogues to sow the seeds of disunion and discord, to stir fanatical emotions and set neighbor against neighbor, it is because the figure of the 'demonic' Jew, less than human, indeed, antihuman, the creation of the medieval mind, still dominates the folk imagination" (1943, p. xii; cf. Woolf, 2011, p. 54). It is evident how the combination of these tacit and direct accusations might provide a climate within which suspicions of the murder of a Christian child for ritual purposes might thrive. It is equally clear that the multi-dimensional nature of anti-Jewish sentiment might encourage greater suspicions encompassing a more "global" reach, as in the later case of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Indeed, even though *The Protocols* did not figure directly in the events that led to the arrest of Mendel Beilis, it is significant for our understanding of the ideological climate that contributed to it, as well as the larger sense of the master-narrative to which the allegations referred. As Edmund Levin notes, in his recent study *A Child of Christian Blood: Murder and Conspiracy in Tsarist Russia: The Beilis Blood Libel* (2014), the period in which the Beilis incident took place was particularly primed for the accusations that were levied against him:

> The corrupt and decadent Russia of Tsar Nicholas II was pervaded by a violently paranoid fear of 'Jewish power,' as evidenced by the some fourteen hundred different government statutes and regulations limiting where Jews could live, what schools they could attend, and which professions they could pursue. In the century's first few years the Black Hundreds [a virulently antisemitic organization] killed and maimed hundreds of Jews in horrifying pogroms, with imperial officials often willingly ignoring the violence. It was around this time that Russian anti-Semites are believed to have fabricated the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the Jews' supposed plan for world domination. (Levin, 2014, xii).

This climate of anti-Jewish sentiment, as well as the broader accusations of "the Jews' supposed plan for world domination," therefore, drew from a deep well of narratives that had endured for centuries. While the blood libel narrative delimits the scale of the alleged conspiracy, in that its focus remains on localized alleged events, the elaborate conspiracy outlined in *The Protocols*, represented as having

been written by colluding Jews themselves, creates an impenetrable wall of nefarious plotting that reinforces the general impression of Jewish complicity. Moreover, its force as a form of persuasion resides in its essentially *narrative* qualities, and in its powerful rhetorical dynamics what Landes describes as "an atrocity-provoking narrative" (2011, p. 31; cf. Landes and Katz, 2011, p. 1). Even in this large-scale, conspiracy-fuelled narrative, the effectiveness of the story rests on the presence of shadowy individual actors, such as the "Machiavellian" figure of a "Grand Rabbi (also known as the Jewish Elder), whose address to a secret conclave in a cemetery in Basel, Switzerland, forms the core of the book" (Webman, 2011, 2). As Esther Webman notes, in *The Protocols*:

> the Jews, who scheme indefatigably, with supernatural cunning, to transform humanity into docile cattle, have invented every evil known to humanity, including capitalism, communism, liberal democracy, and mindless popular culture as diverse means to a single nefarious goal: the enslavement of the world and the establishment of a Jewish world government. (Webman, 2011, 3).

In addition, these personalized yet fictional characters in *The Protocols* narrative, in turn, feed into the familiarity with actual "suspect" Jewish personages at the time, such as the famous Rothschild banking family, who were frequently rumoured to wield unlimited financial and political power (Webman, 2011, 2), and this provided audiences a specific outlet for their contempt. Thus, the specific, detailed expositional content of this very elaborate "small" narrative and the abstract idea of the master-narrative mutually inform each other, providing a sense of collective complicity that simultaneously reinforced the more localized narratives of the blood libel story. Like the blood libel narratives, moreover, the "authenticity" of the *Protocols* forgery relies heavily on the more generalized, implicit master-narrative that informs it.

This complex web of suspicion and accusation, as noted earlier, dominated the early part of the 20th century, and provided the climate within which the accusations against Mendel Beilis could be made. For the purposes of this essay, I will only provide a brief description of those accusations, and will focus primarily on the consistency of those charges with the blood libel legend,

as well as some of the significant ways that Malamud's narrative diverges from that of Beilis.[3]

Mendel Beilis worked as "the on-site supervisor of a large Jewish-owned brick factory in Kiev [Kyiv]" (M. Beilis, 2011, 2). Even this basic fact distinguishes the historical record from Malamud's version, in which the factory is owned by a prominent figure in the Black Hundreds, a fiercely antisemitic group behind many of the pogroms in the Russian Empire at the time (Levin, 2014, pp. xii, 16). Also, rather than living alone at the factory, as in the case of Malamud's protagonist, who is estranged from his wife, Beilis's entire family resided there with him. Finally, even though Beilis "lived […] outside the 'Pale of Settlement'" (3) and therefore in an area "generally forbidden" to Jews, "Beilis's employer had obtained […] a dispensation for him" (3). This last point is critical to my discussion, later, of Malamud's protagonist, whose act of hiding his Jewish identity lies at the heart of his dilemma.

Regarding the crime itself, the fact that the murder victim was found in a cave close to the factory is consistent with the novel. Also like the novel, the victim in Beilis's case was said to have been stabbed forty-seven times, according to an autopsy (3). The other details of the murder are also consistent with the types of blood libel narratives discussed earlier, as well as with the general outlines of the crime as it is conveyed in the novel. In addition, the fact that the police initially suspected that the murder had been done by professional criminals who knew the victim is similar to the novel. Ultimately, Beilis is acquitted of the crime; Malamud's novel, by contrast, ends before the trial. In any case, while Beilis's family was greatly offended by the portrayal of the Beilis-like character in Malamud's novel, for reasons that I will briefly examine later, and even charged the author with having plagiarized significant portions of Beilis's memoir,[4] I consider Malamud's aims in writing his novel to be quite different from that of a personal account indeed, one that employs the devices of fiction[5] in creating the persuasive, even "polemical" (Funkenstein, 1993, 36), function that is characteristic of a counter-narrative. To be sure, Beilis's own narrative provides an evocative and elaborate account of the mistreatment that he endured and justifiably can be considered an effective counter-narrative in its own right. Later,

[3] Most of these details derive from the introductory section of M. Beilis (2011), "A Short History of the Beilis Case," in which the editors rely particularly on Samuel (1966), to which I had only limited access during the writing of this article. Levin (2014) also provides an extensive account of the Beilis case, as well as the social climate at the time of his arrest.

[4] See J. Beilis *et al*. (2011, 228-286) for a detailed and plausible enumeration of the claims of plagiarism that were levied against Malamud.

[5] See Davis (2007, 243) for a discussion of these different aims.

I will briefly discuss some of the relevant differences between the two works; however, a more thorough evaluation of the relative effectiveness of the two works is beyond the aims of this essay, which seeks to demonstrate the qualities that make Malamud's *fictional* counter-narrative compelling.

THEORIZING COUNTER NARRATION

In the previous section, I distinguished between "small narratives" characterized by individual blood libel narratives, or the narrativized components of *The Protocols* and master-narratives that represent more "implicit" ideas or ideologies, but are generally comprised of, or buttressed by, smaller, ideologically relevant narratives. Thus, while the blood libel narrative delimits the scale of the alleged conspiracy, in that its focus remains on localized alleged events, the narrative that animates *The Protocols*, while still what we might term a "small" narrative, depends more overtly on and therefore resembles more closely the master-narrative of alleged Jewish malfeasance, in the sense theorized by Andrews (2004, 1; cf. Bamberg 2004), as a "dominant cultural narrative" that explains what it purports to be a larger phenomenon. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, these "small" narratives and the "master-narratives" to which they relate depend on each other for their plausibility, with the smaller narratives contributing integrally to and reinforcing the overall master-narrative. Looked at another way, Levin claims that "The blood libel has been called the 'master label' against the Jews" (Levin, 2014, xv) and, as I have suggested, beneath this "label" lies an extensive history of "actual stories" (Hyvärinen 2021, 18) or "explicit narratives" (Meretoja 2021, 37) that lend it a dangerous credibility.

In order to understand how Malamud's novel functions in contesting the master-narrative to which the blood libel legend contributes, it is useful to consider the difficulty in depending on competing historical *facts* in the face of a compelling and popular narrative. As the historian David Biale notes in his review of the many ritual murder accusations and trials in the late 1800s and early 1900s:

> […] in the eyes of the anti-Semites, the more evidence the Jews and their defenders adduced against the blood libel, the more persuasive it became. This was because, like the Elders of Zion myth, the blood libel was held to be a secret Jewish teaching. Thus, a strategy of denial, such as, for instance, quoting the biblical laws prohibiting consumption of blood, only reinforced

> the belief in the existence of a secret ritual to the contrary (Biale, 2009, 36).

The notion that resisting false claims with facts will only increase the rigidity and hostility of one's accusers points to the difficulty in asserting forms of truth to an unreceptive audience. In addition, it suggests the possibility that historical evidence of the sort implied by Biale here e.g., presented as "facts" may be less persuasive than an evocative *narrativized* version of events. As historian Amos Funkenstein notes, not all history is in narrative form (1993, 32; cf. Biale, 2023, 44-49), and resistance to untrue or distorting histories perhaps requires narratives that dynamically "contest" (Abbott 2008, 175-192) what Biale calls the "establishment history" (Biale 1982, 7) in this case, the various compelling versions of the blood libel narrative, which are presented as comprised of historical fact despite their inauthenticity. Biale argues that countering or contesting this history involves "find[ing] the truth in a subterranean tradition that must be brought to light […] Counterhistory is a type of revisionist historiography, but where the revisionist proposes a new theory or finds new facts, the counterhistorian transvalues old ones" (Biale, 2023, pp. 45-46).

This conceptualization of counter*history* seems highly compatible with Hanna Meretoja's view of counter-*narratives*, in their function as forms of "transvaluation" of "old" narratives:

> Counter-narratives are critical reinterpretations of dominant narrative models; they typically question power structures underlying master-narratives and shed problematizing light on them […]. Power dynamics play an important role in shaping not just the narrative webs in which we are entangled but also us as subjects who exercise our narrative agency by following and (re)interpreting culturally available narrative models (Meretoja, 2021, 34).

Here, Meretoja raises several points that will be central to the development of my discussion of Malamud's novel. Firstly, she broadens Andrews's notion of a "dominant cultural narrative" (Andrews 2004, 1), cited earlier, to include "dominant narrative *models*," suggesting patterns of narration around which, in the present case, the various versions of the blood libel narrative have taken shape. By offering "critical reinterpretations," counter-narratives in this sense are understood

to be directly engaging with, and challenging, the content of the master-narratives in question.

Finally, by identifying the role of "subjects who exercise our narrative agency by following and (re)interpreting culturally available narrative models," Meretoja emphasizes the potential empowerment of those who have been subjected to the negative consequences of the dominant cultural model. Indeed, one constructive approach that has been taken by Jewish writers in the past has been to retell dominant narratives – as it were, counter-narratively – from the perspective of Jews themselves. I suggest that this is precisely the case in Malamud's novel, as well.

COUNTER-NARRATION IN MALAMUD'S T*HE FIXER*

In *The Fixer*, the fact that the narrative is focalized entirely through the Beilis-like protagonist, Yakov Bok, immediately reorients audiences to the accusations that are levelled against him. On the surface, Malamud's novel serves as a pointed counter-narrative to the treatment of Beilis, as well as a forceful expression of the injustice that he endured. Of course, Malamud, writing in 1966, twenty years after World War II, almost certainly was responding to the implications of the Holocaust by addressing it allegorically as Malamud put it, "mythologically" (cited in Kremer, 1989, 96) through the earlier expression of antisemitism represented by the Beilis case. This would be in keeping with Malamud's approach in his short stories, many of which are, as Kremer describes it, "Holocaust-haunted" (Kremer 1989, 81), rather than confronting the theme directly. Robert Alter identifies this connection, when he sees the allegorical use of the earlier blood libel accusations as "a way of approaching the European Holocaust on a scale that is imaginable, susceptible to fictional representation" (cited in Kremer, 1989, 96; see Alter, 1970, 38). Earlier, I suggested a similar tension between the local and the universal between "small narratives" and master-narratives in distinguishing between the approachability of the blood libel narratives with their identifiable and personalized actors, in contrast with the vastness and abstractness of the conspiracy the master-narrative that underlies them. In fact, the rhetorical force of *The Fixer* extends beyond a mere allegorical application of the earlier Beilis story to the Holocaust: Viewed within the long sweep of Jewish history, it is perhaps reasonable to imagine that readers will apply the narrative to other forms of persecution or atrocity, whether they are directed at Jews or towards other marginalized groups those who, like Bok, only manage to avoid accusation until their identities are revealed.

In the novel, Yakob Bok is a "fixer," or handyman, who lives in a small Jewish enclave in the southwestern part of the Russian Empire, which is today Ukraine. The specific features of Bok's life are largely fictional, as the descendants of Mendel Beilis have often bitterly pointed out: In the novel, his wife, Raisl, is unable to bear children, and this is a source of conflict between them, and ultimately leads to her infidelity, their eventual separation, and finally his departure from the town. Beilis, by contrast, had five children and reportedly remained happily married (J. Beilis *et al.* 2011, 229). In addition, Beilis himself was said to be a religious man (229), whereas Bok describes himself as a "freethinker" (Malamud 1966, 86). While these differences are significant, it also points to the purposes to which Malamud put the story and its protagonist. *The Fixer* is not a work of *historical* fiction, but "a product of artistic imagination" (Friedberg 1970, 276) that draws its inspiration from historical events a historical *fiction*. Rather than representing an inherent martyr figure, moreover, as the real-life Beilis appears to have been to a worldwide audience that protested against his treatment (Levin, 2014, xiv), Malamud presents a deeply flawed character that nevertheless warrants our sympathy, since the extremity of his treatment is witnessed by readers, whether or not they like the character.[6]

The early part of the novel, in the style of Malamud's short fiction, closely studies the character of Bok, establishing his peculiarities and conflicts with others, before having him make the fateful decision to leave his home village to resettle in Kyiv. The act of leaving for the big city provides Malamud with the opportunity to paint a larger picture of the social complexities of Jewish life in the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 20th century. An early encounter between Bok and a boatman who ferries him across a river highlights this dynamic. Significantly, the boatman is unaware that Bok is Jewish, which frees him to express his views:

> "Anyway, God save us all from the bloody Jews," the boatman said as he rowed, "those long-nosed, pock-marked, cheating, bloodsucking parasites. They'd rob us of daylight if they could. They foul up earth and air with their body stink and garlic breaths, and Russia will be done to death by the diseases they spread unless we make an end to it. A Jew's a devil—it's a

[6] See Sklar (2013) for a detailed examination of the ways that narratives persuade readers to feel sympathy for seemingly "unsympathetic" characters.

> known fact—and if you ever watch one peel off his stinking boot you'll see a split hoof, it's true." (Malamud, 2004 [1966], 27)

The boatman's monologue provides a rehearsal of the deeply entrenched beliefs among the ordinary population about the supposed malevolence of the Jewish people. His rant emphasizes not only the "parasitic" and demonic stereotypes discussed earlier, but also the supposed physical qualities that distinguish them from others. It is also the motivation for Bok hiding his Jewish identity, as he does here, as well as in his subsequent encounters with non-Jews in the city. For example, shortly after his arrival in the city, he takes a job at a bricklaying factory owned by a leader of the Black Hundreds, the antisemitic organization noted earlier. Later, when Bok rescues an "elderly" Hasidic man who is being attacked by non-Jewish children and takes him back to his room at the factory, the man asks, "Why are you hiding here?" (Malamud, 2004 [1966], 66). In part, Bok knows that he cannot reveal his true identity due to the laws that prevent Jews from working in certain professions in the city (Malamud, 2004 [1966], 54; cf. Levin, 2014, 11). More importantly, Bok's hiddenness ironically exposes, to readers, his underlying awareness of the treatment to which he might be subject if his identity were to be revealed indeed, his conscious or subconscious apprehension of the operation of the master-narrative over his destiny. For this reason, as the narrator reports of Bok's thinking, "[…] [H]e dreaded what worried him most — to be unmasked as a hidden Jew" (Malamud 2004 [1966], 63).

Thus, while hiddenness protects him momentarily from direct mistreatment, when it is discovered it also reinforces suspicions that have traditionally been directed towards Jews whether the accusation is the drawing of the blood of Christian children, as in the case of Bok/Beilis; conspiracies to undermine the sovereignty of Christ, as in the claims of deicide made against Jews ever since the crucifixion; or an international cabal of Jewish powerbrokers, as presented in *The Protocols*. When Malamud claims, therefore, to be channelling the experience of the Holocaust in depicting Bok's treatment, as noted earlier, this conflation is based on the extremity of Bok's treatment, which, like the Holocaust, is based on the weight of centuries of antisemitic attitudes and practices, and subjects him to considerable risk and terror.[7] This terror is built upon an enduring master-narrative of Jewish conspiracy, secrecy and malfeasance – in this case, focusing specifically on the traditional tale of the blood libel, as the charges against Bok indicate:

[7] See Langer (1987) for a criticism of Malamud's use of the Holocaust for what he considers the incomparability of that event with the earlier forms of persecution of Jews.

> "You're better off confessing,' Grubeshov [the prosecutor] said, "instead of raising this useless stink."
> "Confessing to what, your honor, if as I told you I didn't do it? […] Why would I do such a thing anyway? You're mistaken, your honor. Somebody has made a serious mistake."
>
> But no one would admit it and a heavy sadness settled on him.
>
> "Confessing how it was done," Grubeshov replied. "How you enticed the boy into the stable with sweets, and then two or three of you pounced on him, gagged his mouth, tied him hand and foot, and dragged him up the stairs to your habitat. There you prayed over him with those black hats and robes on, undressed the frightened child, and began to stab him in certain places, twelve stabs first, then another making thirteen wounds—thirteen each in the region of the heart, on the neck, from which most of the blood is drawn, and on the face—according to your cabalistic books. You tormented and terrified him, enjoying the full shuddering terror of the child victim and his piteous pleas for mercy, in the meanwhile collecting his dripping lifeblood into bottles until you had bled him white. The five or six litres of warm blood you put into a black satchel, and this, if I understand the custom, was delivered by a hunchback Jew to the synagogue in time for making the matzos and afikomen [for Passover]. And when poor Zhenia Golov's heart was drained of blood and he lay on the floor lifeless, you and the tzadik [Hasidic master] Jew with the white stockings picked him up and carried him here in the dead of night and left his corpse in the cave. Then you both ate bread and salt so that his ghost would not haunt you and hurried away before the sun rose […]." (Malamud, 2004 [1966], 135-36)

I have quoted the prosecutor's, Grubeshov's, description of the accusation at length because it is instructive to observe the many elements that it has in common with the historical blood libel tradition.. From a narrative perspective, the description is remarkable for its litany of specific detail: the precise moments in the abduction; the elements of the alleged ritual bloodletting; the "hunchback Jew" who carried

the blood to the synagogue; the "tzadik" who supposedly assisted in disposing of the body; and the superstitions that are purported to characterize the behaviours of Jews. These details not only create a vivid picture of the alleged crime, but, like earlier blood libel narratives, provide a susceptible audience with a compelling account of the danger in their midst. Clearly, the inclusion of details such as the boy's "tormented and terrorized" experience, as well as the perpetrators' "enjoy[ment of] the full shuddering terror of the child victim," naturally increases the courtroom audience's sympathy for the victim and contempt for the alleged criminals. In addition, by emphasizing the number of times that the child purportedly was stabbed, and claiming that this number is based on "cabalistic books," the prosecutor provides a foundation for the claim that the murder was ritually sanctioned, that it is an established practice within Judaism, even though, as noted earlier, "the consumption of blood" (Biale, 2009, 36) is forbidden by Jewish law. Finally, the narrative points to the alienness of the perpetrators by emphasizing, like the boatman earlier, features that mark them as essentially different, particularly their "black hats and robes" and the "hunchback Jew" who assists them. All of these elements provide an extensive and, by its repetition over time, familiar trope of a Jewish tendency to conduct ritual murders.

While the initially disagreeable portrayal of the fixer Bok would seem an unusual choice to be the vehicle for contesting the ritual murder narrative specifically, as well as the larger master-narrative of Jewish malfeasance more generally, we find that our role in accompanying him through the vicissitudes of his life, the accusations against him, and finally his imprisonment, gradually enables us as readers to understand the severity and unfairness of his treatment, effectively moving readers from a disagreeable "first impression" of the character towards a more nuanced and sympathetic one.[8] I have already noted Bok's inclination to hide his Jewish identity and suggested how the narrative essentially places us in his thoughts as he rationalizes, to himself, his reasons for doing so. The fear that underlies this decision is reinforced by his subsequent capture and prosecution. In that prosecution, the "case" against him is laid out, as noted above, by very clearly following the details of the traditional blood libel narrative. The novel subverts this narrative, however, by giving us access to his reactions to the accusations. For example, during the interrogation cited above, the narrator describes Bok's reaction to the demand that he confess to the crime: "'Somebody has made a serious mistake.' But no one would admit to it and a heavy sadness settled on him" (Malamud, 2004 [1966], 135). This description of Bok's experience reinforces our

[8] See Sternberg (1978) and Sklar (2013) for discussions of this narrative rhetorical dynamic.

sense of his mistreatment, especially since his feelings are not shared *by him* in order to convince us of his innocence, but by the heterodiegetic narrator who omnisciently reveals his responses to the events that are taking place. Bok may or may not be a "likeable" protagonist, but our perceptions of him are reliable within the frame of the novel.

This counter-narrative is reinforced extensively by the brutal imprisonment and torture that he subsequently undergoes, and which constitutes the largest portion of the novel. Whether or not "Malamud's canvases of old Russian jails bear, not surprisingly, a strong imprint of Dostoyevsky," as Maurice Friedberg claims (1970, 277; cf. Alter 1970, 36), or even of Beilis's memoir itself, as discussed earlier, the extremity of Bok's imprisonment is startling in its depiction of the injustice to which he is subjected. In addition, contrary to our expectation that the case will be resolved through a decisive trial and acquittal in which Bok's claims of innocence will be vindicated already expected by those who are aware of the historical case against Beilis we wait, as he waits, for an indictment that seemingly never will come. The novel ends with Bok finally on his way to trial with antisemitic protesters and sympathetic supporters lining the road on the way to the court. Of this ending, the novelist Jonathan Safran Foer, in an introduction to the 2004 edition, writes: "The seemingly ambiguous climax is not ambiguous at all. Regardless of Yakov's ultimate fate, a few good people have expressed their solidarity with him, and hence their humanity, and his" (2004, xi).

This theme is articulated directly, when one of the few who defend him, the Investigating Magistrate Bibikov, comes to his cell and tells him in what arguably can be considered the implied author's credo:

> "[…] I act as an optimist because I find I cannot act at all, as a pessimist. One often feels helpless in the face of the confusion of these times, such a mass of apparently uncontrollable events and experiences to live through, attempt to understand, and if at all possible, give order to; but one must not withdraw from the task if he has some small thing to offer—he does so at the risk of diminishing his humanity" (Malamud, 2004 [1966], 173).

The fact that Bibikov confides these sentiments with the accused prisoner, and later is found dead in an adjoining cell in the prison, suggests that Bok is meant to absorb and adopt them. One of the key means by which the novel counters the master-narrative, indeed, is through the process of re-humanizing the accused. Bok begins to live by Bibikov's credo, emphasizing the dignity of humanity while moving from

aimless fixer to martyr, and growing from self-obsession towards complexity and compassion. As a result, he reconciles with his estranged wife, and cares for those who have shown him a degree of humanity despite the risk to themselves.

In an important sense, then, Malamud looks both backwards and forwards. Looking backwards, he incorporates the awareness of the very distant past, as represented by the medieval blood libel legend; the distant past of the early 20th-century pogroms and the case of Beilis; and for him, writing in 1966 the recent past and the Holocaust (see Kremer, 1989, pp. 95-102; Langer, 1987). Looking forwards, he anticipates the recent dramatic rise in antisemitism, as well as the endurance of the master-narrative in current conspiracy theories imbued with elements of the blood libel and *The Protocols*. This influence doesn't necessarily come in the form of an absolute reproduction of the traditional master-narrative, as Hyvärinen points out: "[…] It is perfectly possible to enforce a master-narrative by drawing substantially but not exclusively on it" (2021, 22).

Having incorporated these currents, having raised the alarm of the past in the present, the novel thus fights back, narratively. Bok, recapturing his individuality, can be seen as a figure that, to cite Meretoja again, comes to awareness of the "narrative webs in which he is entangled" and "as a subject who exercises his narrative agency by following and (re)interpreting" the master-narrative that has landed him in prison (Meretoja, 2021, 34). Bok begins to recognize, as Bamberg (2004, 363) suggests, that we need to take into account versions of ourselves (or versions of history) that are both "complicit with" (accepting of) master-narratives and "countering" (opposed to) those dominant narratives. By taking responsibility for this "complicity" his own earlier passivity in the face of the enduring antisemitic master-narrative Bok, even in prison, takes possession of his destiny, turning this counter-narrative into an "*act of resistance*" (Meretoja, 2021, 39, emphasis original).

This emphasis on *action*, in turn, points to the ethical foundation at the heart of Malamud's narrative project. As Safran Foer concludes in his introduction, "While *The Fixer* isn't a book *about morality*, it is a *moral book*. That is, rather than offering a flimsy directive, it presents the reader with a forceful question: Why aren't you doing anything?" (2004, xi, emphasis original). In the end, this is one of the primary aims of an ethical counter-narrative, one that, among other elements identified by Meretoja in her "heuristic model," "expand[s] […] the repertoire of socially available narrative models of sense-making and thereby our sense of the possible […] (Meretoja, 2021, 40). By activating readers for the challenge ahead, Malamud cultivates "our sense of the possible" that is,

the possibility of moving beyond the confines of a master-narrative that has shaped perceptions of Jews for centuries.

CONCLUSION

The master-narrative of alleged Jewish malevolence and malfeasance has a long and sordid history throughout the world, and particularly in Europe. Relying on a variety of "small narratives," it constructs a view of Jews and their supposedly malign influence on the world, in ways that have led to their repeated persecution. In this essay, I have examined that master-narrative through the prism of one particularly pernicious small narrative, the blood libel legend, and its contribution to the perception of Jews generally. In addition, I have argued that a significant vehicle for contesting that narrative, as well as the larger master-narrative, can be found in Bernard Malamud's 1966 novel *The Fixer*. I have suggested that the novel gradually builds readers' sympathy for the accused protagonist and facilitates their resistance to antisemitism in its many guises. Moreover, the narrative does not merely make the reality of the Holocaust accessible by presenting its gravity through the more accessible scale of the blood libel narrative, as discussed earlier. The reverse is also true: by filtering the specific case of a fictionalized Mendel Beilis through the then-recent memory of the Holocaust, Malamud elevates the discourse of his counter-narrative to match the scope and endurance of the master-narrative itself.

More importantly, whether or not we are persuaded by the rhetorical offering of *The Fixer*, Malamud demonstrates the efficacy of resistance to oppression by reinforcing some of the essential elements of counter-narration generally. As noted earlier, the process of formulating a counter-narrative that resists a "dominant narrative model" enables us to "exercise our narrative agency" (Meretoja, 2021, 34) in ways that move the discourse gradually away from repressive master-narratives and towards more nuanced perceptions of humanity. Or, to repeat the words of the Investigating Magistrate Bibikov, in what I claimed might be taken as Malamud's credo for the novel: "[O]ne must not withdraw from the task if he has some small thing to offer—he does so at the risk of diminishing his humanity" (Malamud, 2004 [1966], 173).

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