

ASPECTS OF FORM AS WORLD:  
AN INTERPRETATION OF THE NOVELS  
OF MORDECAI RICHLER

by

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### Abstract

Starting from the premise that form and content are one, and seeing interpretation as the elucidation of their unity, this thesis attempts to interpret the novels of Mordecai Richler. Taking form to be that which forms the world of the novel, and to be that world as an organized whole—form as process and as product, this study examines the nature of the worlds of Richler's novels, how their nature reflects particularly in character, setting and plot, and, finally, how the literary forms Richler uses bear upon the worlds he depicts. The Introduction describes theoretically the basis and nature of this interpretive approach, and defines its scope and discipline.

Chapter One deals with Richler's first three novels, The Acrobats, set in a war-weary Spain, both realistically treats André Bennett's search for definition and dramatizes symbolically how evil, as a constant force in man's life because it is a permanent part of his nature, takes its toll in André's death. Son of a Smaller Hero, Richler's most formally realistic novel, describes Noah Adler's search for definition within a particular and tightly-knit social context, and explores how the fundamental tension between man's need for passion and his passionate need for security, which

results in him suppressing his passions in order to gain security, complicates this search. A Choice of Enemies, the most bitterly pessimistic of the first three novels, projects a world which overwhelms any attempt to find meaning and value in it, and in which, as the title suggests, a choice of enemies is the only kind of choice the characters can make.

Chapter Two discusses The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz, focussing on how this novel marks a departure from the novels which precede it, how Richler's controlled use of the picaresque and comic forms affects the world he projects, and how this world in its ambiguity and corruptness reflects itself in Duddy, who is undoubtedly Richler's most successful character. It is the argument of Chapter Two that Duddy Kravitz is not a comic novel, and that the point at which Duddy's world absorbs him marks where the novel's overriding pessimism absorbs the comic.

Chapter Three concerns itself with The Incomparable Atuk and Cocksure, and seeks to demonstrate how the pessimism of the previous novels intensifies and darkens as Richler moves from a predominant mode of verisimilitude to the caricature, grotesquerie, and fantasy of satire and black humour. The point at which the satire turns into black humour is the point at which the malevolence Richler depicts establishes its

predominance, its power and significance beyond satire's ability to diminish it by ridicule. For it subsumes the moral norm satire needs to make its ridicule effective.

Because Richler incorporates so much from his previous novels into St. Urbain's Horseman, Chapter Four treats it both as a work unto itself and as a kind of summing up. Seen from the perspective of the latter, it serves well as the basis for a conclusion about Richler's work thus far. Controlling this conclusion is the contention that the return to a mode of verisimilitude in St. Urbain's Horseman is integral to its accommodation of the growing pessimism of the previous novels. Rather than being clearly affirmative, this accommodation—Jake's ability to find some meaning and value in the world, is qualified by the unabated continuance of the sources of Richler's pessimism. The tension here, paradoxically, is the synthesis of Richler's pessimism and a new partial resolve.

interpretation is not (as most people assume) an absolute value, a gesture of mind situated in some timeless realm of capabilities. Interpretation must itself be evaluated, within a historical view of human consciousness. In some contexts, interpretation is a liberating act...in other cultural contexts, it is reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling.

Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation, p. 7.

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## Introduction

This thesis is an attempt to interpret the novels of Mordecai Richler; and interpretation, as Northrop Frye suggests, is an act of translation—"the process of translating into explicit or discursive language what is implicit in the poem."<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, however, is justified in objecting harshly to that kind of interpretation which, basing itself on the fallacy of the division between form and content, seeks to reduce the work of art to its content, and thereby seeks to make it manageable and conformable.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to this kind of approach, René Wellek and Austin Warren, throughout Theory of Literature, argue for the necessity of seeing the work as a totality, and for a view of "form" as "the aesthetic structure of a literary work—that which makes it literature...that which aesthetically organizes its 'matter'."<sup>3</sup>

Herbert Read's account of Martin Heidegger's analysis of the concept of form amplifies what Wellek and Warren argue for. Form, for Heidegger and Read, belongs to the very essence of being, since being is that which achieves a limit for itself: "'That which places itself in its limit, completing itself, and so stands, has form.'"<sup>4</sup> Form, as a principle of order, that which forms, is what makes art "complete itself" and have



autonomy, or, as Wellek and Warren would put it, have its own mode of existence. As an ordering principle, form, to Heidegger, is identical with logos, which he defines as "gathering and togetherness:"

'gathering...maintains in a common bond the conflicting and that which tends apart... It does not let what it holds in its power dissolve into an empty freedom from opposition, but by uniting the opposites maintains the full sharpness of their tension.'<sup>5</sup>

This description of dynamic unity could easily be a paraphrase of Coleridge's conception of a work of literature as an organic unity which exists in its own way and with its own kind of life as the whole issue from the harmonious involvement of all its parts, and as the parts are unified by the whole to which they belong. Finally, it is crucial to understand that the form of a literary work is the same whether seen as stationary or as moving through the work from beginning to end, whether seen as process or as product, since these are but aspects of each other, intrinsically related ways of speaking about the same thing.<sup>6</sup>

Just as Wellek and Warren argue that a work of literature is a self-defining totality with its own mode of existence, so they also argue that "the novelist offers...a world...recognizeable as overlapping the empirical world but distinct in its self-coherent intelligibility."<sup>7</sup> This "self-coherent intelligibility" characterizes the form of the novel's world, its

existence as a self-defining totality informed by a unifying principle. Dorothy Van Ghent makes this explicit:

A novel itself is one complex pattern, or Gestalt, made up of component ones. In it inhere such a vast number of traits, all organized in subordinate systems that function under the governance of a single meaningful structure, that the nearest similitude for a novel is a 'world.' This is a useful similitude because it reflects the rich multiplicity of the novel's elements and, at the same time, the unity of the novel as a self-defining body.<sup>8</sup>

More, no novelist offers a world, an illusion of reality, without simultaneously offering a world-view or view of life—the two phrases are synonymous—which distinguishes the novel's world as a particular kind of world, and makes it cohere. Indeed, it is world-view which Frye describes when he describes form "as meaning, holding the poem together in a simultaneous structure."<sup>9</sup>

These considerations define generally the scope and discipline of this thesis, of what it means by interpretation, for it seeks to elucidate what orders the worlds of Richler's novels, paying attention to how world-view simultaneously informs and is informed by the parts of these worlds. To be sure, interpretation can only be approximation, since ultimate meaning resides only in the work itself, and it is not the intent here to engage in heretical paraphrase. Seeking to understand the reciprocal relationship between the parts and

the whole in Richler's novels opens up possibilities for discussion as multitudinous and diverse as are the parts. A certain eclecticism in this discussion is, therefore, unavoidable, and, indeed, necessary. To quote Frye again, "The sense of tact, of the desirability of not pushing a point of interpretation 'too far,' is derived from the fact that the proportioning of emphasis in criticism should normally bear a rough analogy to the proportioning of emphasis in the poem,"<sup>10</sup>

The truism that novels are about people, and the synonymy of the phrases world-view and view of life, reflect how a view of the world is inseparable from a view of the condition of existence in that world, and from, it can be deduced, an insight into the sources of that condition. And, as these sources make life the way it is, determine the nature of the novel's world, so they render the novel's world self-coherently intelligible, and so become form as meaning. This is why Wellek and Warren equate the novel's "'attitude toward life'" with its "fourth and last stratum, that of the 'metaphysical qualities,'"<sup>11</sup> and this is why, as the condition of existence is embodied in the lives of the characters, characters cannot exist in any fictional worlds except their own, and why it is critically invalid to treat character as an isolable element within the total pattern of the novel. To understand the world of Richler's novels is to understand what makes life

the way it is, and is to understand how the way it is reflects in the characters' lives.

Just as characters cannot be treated as isolable elements within the total pattern of the novel, so they must be seen in terms of setting and plot. Setting functions in Richler's fiction both as social causation and as metonymic expression of the condition of existence. The Montreal Jewish ghetto settings are the powerfully formative social environments which most of Richler's young protagonists—Noah Adler, Duddy Kravitz, and Jake Hersh as a youth—grow up in and can never finally leave behind, just as Richler has stated that he is himself, as a writer, rooted in the first twenty years of his life, and that, as a result, and even though he lives, and writes in, England, he always writes out of his Canadian experience.<sup>12</sup> The London settings, in contrast, tend to be backdrops for the homeless, rootless exiles who people his novels, tend to be objective-correlatives for their alienated condition. Only in the world of Cocksure, in which fantasy overtakes reality, and in which all power lies in the hands of the Star Maker, does setting have relatively little importance.

Dorothy Van Ghent suggests that "human experience is organized into patterns that are in movement... 'events,'"<sup>13</sup> and E.M. Forster has wisely defined plot as "a narrative of

events, the emphasis falling on causality."<sup>14</sup> Causality, that which orders events, which accounts for why and when things happen, is precisely the principle which orders the novel's world, and is implicit in the conjunction of the events which are bodied forth. The plot of the romance, for example, which unravels a complicated pattern of chance and coincidence that works mysteriously toward some end, expresses a world order of inscrutable Fate and religion, while the ordered disorder of the picaresque plot expresses an intuition that the world is without order, is chaotic.<sup>15</sup> As the novel thrives on particularity, so plot is the particularizing of world-view in space and time. To understand the world of Richler's novels is to understand how the organization of events implies the form of the novels' worlds.

A consideration of form as world must take into account the literary forms Richler uses insofar as they structure the worlds of his novels, structure their world-views. Indeed, an examination of how his darkening world-view is consistent with his shift from a dominant mode of verisimilitude to the caricature and fantasy of satire and black humour largely guides the course of discussion in this thesis, while the accommodation of this growing pessimism implicit in the return to a mode of verisimilitude in St. Urbain's Horseman provides an excellent basis for a conclusion. There is no desire here

to make categorical genre definitions in which to fit Richler's novels; rather the desire has been to establish working definitions which can be useful as tools for better understanding his novels. And these definitions have behind them a painful awareness of their inescapable arbitrariness and of their inevitable tendency toward rigidity. As Richler is a self-conscious novelist, and as novelists imitate literature as well as nature,<sup>16</sup> so he uses the technique of submerged form, which, as described by Johnathon Rabkin, consists of using a literary form in order to undermine it, to invert the view of reality implicit in it, and so reinforce the actual view being presented.<sup>17</sup> Richler consistently buries forms within his novels, and to understand, as much as it can be understood, when these forms begin and end, where their views of reality begin and end, is to have an illuminating insight into the kind of world he is giving form to.

Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation (New York: Delta 1966), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956), p. 241.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert Read, The Origins of Form in Art (New York: Horizon Press, 1965), p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> Frye, p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> Wellek and Warren, p. 214.

<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Van Ghent, The English Novel (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Frye, p. 83.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>11</sup> Wellek and Warren, p. 225.

<sup>12</sup> Nathan Cohen, "A Conversation with Mordecai Richler," Tamarack Review (Winter, 1957), p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Van Ghent, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> E.M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 130.

<sup>15</sup> Stuart Miller, The Picaresque Novel (Cleveland: Press of Case Western University Reserve, 1907), pp. 9-12.

<sup>16</sup> Frye, pp. 95-96.

<sup>17</sup> Johnathon Rabkin, The Technique of Modern Fiction  
(London: Edward Arnold, 1968), pp. 122-125.



## Chapter One

### Richler's First Three Novels

In The Acrobats, Andre's search for values, for an identity with integrity, is made next to impossible by the world's evil, which, in its heedless destruction, defines life's absurdity. In the world of this novel, evil, the will to cause suffering and destroy life, is universal in the sense that it exists in all men. Consequently, to live morally, man must struggle against the evil within himself: "no idea or cause...will save us all. Salvation is personal."<sup>1</sup> In spite of this necessity, man tends to evade his moral responsibility by living in illusions, by defining the problem as existing outside of himself, or by simply resigning himself, as Derek does, to what is worst about himself. Further, since evil exists in all men, it can strike as unpredictably and as quickly as one man can harm another, and it can become as abstract and entangled as the ways in which men socially and politically organize themselves.

George Woodcock is accurate in describing the style in The Acrobats as "derivative eclecticism."<sup>2</sup> Further, the stylistic variations structure the search for values. The realism of the concentrated descriptions of the setting, pregnant with concrete, sensory detail, and the realism of

the presentation of character and action, projects the world in its objective reality. In contrast, in the rendering of André's tormented inner life, this description shifts into a style which juxtaposes and merges realistic detail and impressionistic images which at times become surreal. Not only is the inner world of nightmare, hallucination and paranoia seen from inside itself, but it is built into the narrative as a way of seeing the world and as a way of expressing the world's insanity. Indeed, at times it is confusing whether certain descriptions are André's impressions or the narrator slipping into impressionistic description: "Lamp post like the luminous yellow spittle of gnarled immobile cripples. Neon café lights, wavering kaleidoscopic breeze in a cash-and-carry limbo, advertising particular brands of glitter death" (p. 154).

Regardless of this confusion, just as Susan Sontag suggests that "every style embodies an epistemological decision, an interpretation of how and what we perceive,"<sup>3</sup> so this contrast in styles projects the dialectic between inner and outer worlds, in which the conscious self is the point of intersection and synthesis between them. Just as André, as an artist, remakes external reality in his art, so, as a man, he remakes external reality in his mind. And, while others generally tend to avoid what is worst about themselves, André's descent into delirium—"There was no longer an outer objective world" (p. 141)—is the

measure of how deeply he confronts his own evil in order to remake himself. Generally, since style is an interpretation of how and what we perceive, the variations in style in The Acrobats project various ways of seeing, and being in, the world which define and qualify each other. The juxtaposition of the sympathetic description of the full-blooded, violently passionate, street-dancing celebrants in their ecstasy and the satiric description of the thin-blooded, brittle Mrs. Ina Bicks in her formality is an obvious example of this (pp. 37-40).

George Bowering has described excellently the novel's panoramic structure:

The book is made up of shuffled scenes, the searching spotlights, shift from acrobat to acrobat... The lights probe all over Valencia in the present, but also in the past of Montreal and Madrid and Businesstown U.S.A. The different places, the whole acrobatic routine, and snippets of knowledge are exchanged with handholds. We watch not the performance of one man's life, but the tumbling pattern of the human condition.<sup>4</sup>

What the "shuffled scenes" project, however, is not just "the tumbling pattern of the human condition," but more, the performance of particular lives within this pattern. Indeed, the panoramic structure is an expression of the simultaneity of man's unique self and universal self. This simultaneity is crucial to the novel's world-view: that the human condition

as such is the generalized state of all men, and is, given an essential human nature, man's metaphysical condition, a dimension of which is the world's evil. Each man is a unique embodiment of this condition, and his actions are its particular manifestation in time and place. This is expressed in the beginning of Book II as it moves from a quotation from Maimonides' A Guide of the Perplexed, to a description of "the world at large" during "an ordinary day," to the actual setting of the novel: "It is now 11:30 a.m., Sunday, April 18, 1951. Valencia, Spain." In terms of the world-view, the various similarities between characters suggest their sameness in relation to universal human nature; and, the tension between the foreshadowed inevitability of André's death and his search for meaning springs from the concurrence of the symbolic dramatization of evil taking its toll, and the realistic treatment of his search.

Just as Richler personally contemplates a world of fallen absolutes, so the world of The Acrobats is a physically and spiritually fallen world. And if, as George Bowering perceptively suggests, Toni symbolizes Spain, "war-weary...expressing the desire to get out of the ideological war, and seeking means to survive,"<sup>5</sup> then the fallen innocence and nobility of her ancestral past symbolizes the fallen innocence and nobility of Spain's past: "She was a fisherman's daughter, from the Island of Ibiza. The nobility of that Island people

...was plainly on her face" (p. 32). The idea of an irredeemable idyllic past is suggested when André's dream, which translates his agonizing quest into an exotic adventure of romance in Frye's definition of that term as a fictional mode characterized by an idealized world of marvels midway between myth and realism,<sup>6</sup> is undercut by the intrusion of a comparatively harsh realism: "So he set sail again looking into the wind... The floor was a litter of paint-soiled rags, linseed drippings, brushes, paints" (p. 19).

The predominant imagery of filth, disease, body ugliness, and rats, which evokes the squalor of the "fallen world," becomes in its totality a metaphor of man's diseased spirituality. And the implication in this metaphor is that the world's squalor is an extension of man because he has defiled the world with his evil. Thus, Toni tells André, who has polluted Ida—his "filth inside her" (p. 116), "There is something rotten inside you" (p. 137). The further implication is that man must start from the squalor and misery of his fallen state in his search for values. This is symbolized by the recurrent image of the crippled beggar: man, crippled by his fallenness, the result of his evil, is reduced to servitude in order to survive. As Toni exclaims to André, "You can do nothing...Kill, and kill, and kill. Me, I would rather live on my knees" (p. 43, italics mine). And as Barney's real last name—Lazarus—implies, man is a leprous beggar, but one whom

Christ will not raise from the dead. That the crippled beggar objectifies the spiritual state of the people in the novel is explicit: just as he sings "an imbecile tune...arms outstretched as if awaiting crucifixion" (p. 30, italics mine) so "the fifty-year old men-children attempted to renew...calculated idiocy" (p. 29, italics mine) and so the "new post-war generation" sits "sad and unknowing...waiting, waiting for something they were at a loss to explain" (p. 29, italics mine), locked into their spiritual void as the beggar is immobilized by his severed legs.

The carnival is the attempt to escape the filth and ugliness of life through festivity, and is the ritualistic attempt to exorcize evil by burning the fallas. And just as "They put our Spain, / That sorely wounded Spain, in carnival dress" (p. 5) so the visiting Americans are, for André, "superimposed upon the catastrophe of Spain" (p. 72), their own carnival the aimless socializing at the "Mocambo Club." Related to the pervasive celebrating is the laughter which recurs so frequently as to become a leitmotif. The laughter is significant as a response to the cosmic joke of an absurd world, a response which is a self-protective stance that attempts to accommodate the meaninglessness. For laughter can be seen as ego-gratification which derives from a sense of superiority, liberty and triumph, just as to laugh at a joke is to revel in the triumph of understanding it.<sup>7</sup> Thus, to laugh at an absurd world which defies

the meanings imposed on it, is to apprehend the joke of its absurdity, and is, implicitly, to feel superior to those who strive to create meaning. Some of this is what lies behind Derek's cynical giggling and behind André's statement to Guillermo that "Everything is a joke" (p. 69). Yet, after André has his revelation and realizes that he is superior to what he has been—"I am a bigger man now... My feelings are more than anger" (p. 161)—"His laugh began slowly then swelled up and broke out happily" (p. 161). Significantly, Chaim, described as a "melancholy clown," combines both an irreverent and a serious attitude toward the world and himself. By hiding his vulnerability behind self-deprecating jokes and by absorbing his past of anguish, he strikes a survival balance of buoyancy through humour and humanity through humanistic seriousness.

The metaphor of people as acrobats is related to the image of the crippled beggar. In its broadest sense, this metaphor describes the inordinate difficulty of ordering chaos, of, metaphorically speaking, maintaining balance on the tightrope of existence in an annihilating world—that is, the acrobatics of survival. If it seems distorted to see a similarity between the image of the crippled beggar and the metaphor of people as acrobats, it is less so when understood that just as the vulnerable, immobilized beggar depends upon others for survival, so the acrobat in animated suspension, where precisely his

animated freedom makes him most vulnerable and most immobilizes his capacity for the sure footing of survival, is totally dependent upon the other's handhold. This metaphoric meaning and the description of André doing "tightrope dances on high and windy places" (p. 127) crystallize in his encounter with Kraus on the bridge, itself a symbol of the tightrope.

The simultaneity of André's death and the explosion of the giant gypsy falla aligns the realistic treatment of his search for meaning and the symbolic dramatization of the world's evil. His death is the climax in this dramatization. Just as in Romeo and Juliet, where the abundant foreshadowing implies the fatalistic inevitability of the "star-crossed lovers'" death, and just as their death is the inevitable result of their parents' strife, so the heavy foreshadowing of André's death implies like inevitabilities: "André. You will be killed. It is the will of society and unavoidable. Even if it is only a symbolic death" (p. 68). And, at this level, while André is a helpless victim of the world evil, Kraus, described as a "Little wooden soldier...a puppet" of "reflexes, emotions, reactions" (pp. 178-179), "slow to comprehend but quick to violence" (p. 18) is the automaton agent of this evil. His personal proximity to his symbolic role suggests how much as an individual he contributes to the force of which he is the agent.



That Kraus as one individual is one contributor to evil as a universal force illustrates that this force is man-made, and that the dramatization of its workings is the dramatization of the havoc men reap upon themselves. Consequently, while the fallas are satiric caricatures, to the extent that men are subject to universal forces inexorably exerting themselves, and to the extent that the fallas, as the projections of men, embody these forces—"Their construction hadn't sprung from the spontaneous mischief of a fiesta-minded city, but instead was part of the master plan of some diabolical spirit" (p. 46)—so men, as the embodiment of these forces, are themselves fallas, the caricatures of the caricatures they construct. Thus, just as the fallas are burnt as inanimate scapegoats because "in all of us there is some evil and we're just too weak to burn it. So we build evil toys...and burn them" (p. 146), so André becomes an inanimate scapegoat for Kraus who cannot face his own evil. And just as the fallas hover constantly and menacingly in the background as expressions to men of what they are, so Kraus and André hover menacingly in each other's backgrounds as reminders to each other of their own evil. Further, André and Toni are both linked to the giant gypsy falla: André is "the doomed gypsy," and the inevitable burning of the falla presages his own death; Toni whom he loves so that she can destroy him (p. 20), expects him "to pop off or be shot any moment (p. 77), and is described by Chaim as a "gypsy" (p. 77). Because men reflect the reflections

of themselves, the explosion of the giant gypsy falla coincident with André's death both mirrors and is mirrored by the world evil taking its inevitable toll.

At the personal level, each man must confront, recognize and conquer the evil within him. And this effort on André's part marks his heroic and paradoxical significance, and explicitly denies the interpretation that "the moral seems to be that by trying to stay uncommitted, Bennett is...destroyed."<sup>8</sup> André invites agonizing confusion in order to gain a proper understanding of things: "There was the truth...and if he was strong enough he would find it. But until then...his centre would be confusion" (p. 61). That this confusion and its attendant anguish are the source of his moral strength expresses in the novel's terms the existential paradox that man's insecurity is the source of his freedom, that his dread is the beginning of his "authenticity," because security is an illusion in the face of the sheer incomprehensibility of existence. While the refusal to get involved with the world is non-action which is cowardice (p. 56) (Derek admits that he is a coward (p. 70) and that he is bored and impotent (p. 150)), André is courageous to the extent that he is involved with the world, even though in this involvement he shares in its filth. As Chaim says to him, "You are not bored. You are not... uncommitted. You are always taking part... The earth is in your

hand and you are dirty" (p. 128). And while Andre desperately desires to believe in something, his lack of commitment is in actuality his refusal to define himself glibly or, like Kraus, to define himself by making a choice of enemies.

To recognize, confront and conquer one's evil demands meeting squarely one's past, for, as Sartre argues, "the relation of the present to the past is the relation of... consciousness to being... The past is the being which I am... It is that which I cannot change, although I can give it new meanings through my actions."<sup>9</sup> André, therefore, must learn "that he could not sever himself from his past but instead could absorb it intelligently"(p. 73). The reconstruction of his past through flashback, anecdote, nightmare and hallucination becomes correlative to his reliving it and absorbing it.

In paradise, man's mind is filled with the bliss of innocence, but in the novel's fallen world, he is steeped in tormenting subjectivity, the internalization of his fallenness. Consequently, self-definition, where the conscious self is the point of intersection between inner and outer worlds, demands raising this subjectivity to the level of consciousness, the awareness of the outer world, since subjectivity tends toward insanity. Thus, at a peak point in his delirium, André's near insanity is due to the encroachment

of subjectivity upon objectivity: "There was no longer an outer objective world" (p. 141); and while his fear of rats may be a repressed fear of confronting his own evil, the presence of the rat on his body becomes the counterpart in external reality for his inner torment which now is released into consciousness: "Suddenly something snapped... The strain, the booming in his head...easing up... There were, and always had been, rats in the room" (p. 158). And when, attempting to clutch the rat, he digs his fingernails into his own skin, he clutches himself as the source of his own evil. André has emerged from the womb of his fallenness; he has been born into awareness. This is signified by the fact that his initial revelation is only a beginning which will need growth: "But he was not yet certain of what was happening to him. It will take time, he thought" (p. 161), and by Chaim's comment that André "died before he reached maturity" (p. 188).

To the extent that André is one more individual in an indifferent world, his death renders his entire struggle poignantly futile. His insignificance is powerfully conveyed in his death-throes as the reader, projected into his mind, is moved to awe by his tenacious fight for life—"Suddenly, his fingers digging into the mud, he pulled himself upwards... 'No. Just a bit - yet'" (p. 165)—and then is distanced and numbed as the narrative shifts to an indifferent external

point of view: "the man saw that he was dead and he walked away." (p. 165) And just as the novel continues into Book IV, so his death becomes one past event in an ongoing world, meaning more or less to different people who continue to live out their lives in their own ways. Still Book IV and the "Afterwards" signify that at least there is an afterwards.

The same patterns continue: just as characters' similarities suggest their sameness in relation to universal human nature, so Sam, as has André, thinks everything is part of a tremendous joke, and has Kraus' athletic build. Toni's baby, Kraus' son named André, continues within himself the past, and bears, presumably his own burden of evil. As the novel ends on a note of "hope", so all that has gone before has been the exploration and presentation of its possibilities.

André's search for definition occurs in a fallen world rendered absurd by the destructiveness of its evil, and in which the absence of a stable social setting is part of the chaos. Jewishness, as personified by Chaim, becomes a universal model for humanistic survival. In Son of a Smaller Hero, which George Woodcock describes as "the only novel by Richler that, in a customary sense, can be called realistic,"<sup>10</sup> the intensely visualized realism projects the tightly-knit social setting which frames and structures Noah's search for definition, as Richler explores the possibilities for self-

definition offered by Jewishness as it exists within the "invisible walls" of the ghetto.<sup>11</sup> Though the inscription of Son of a Smaller Hero, Dostoievski's proposition that "If God did not exist, everything would be lawful," anticipates a metaphysical theme, it is a measure of the novel's social-rootedness that it is concerned as much, if not more, with the quest for definition within a particular social context, than within the vacuum caused by God's death.

The existential concerns in Son of a Smaller Hero underline why it is a realistic rather than a naturalistic novel. Naturalism posits a deterministic universe in which character and destiny are completed, shaped by heredity and environment. In contrast, existentialism asserts that a man cannot be reduced to his "givens", that, as a consciousness, he can project beyond them and make them over for himself. Son of a Smaller Hero explores the social side of the existential route to self-fulfillment. Because man finds himself in a world of ready-made meanings and modes of behaviour, he must separate himself from the conventional and negate its authority in order to reconstruct it. This necessity is complicated by man's passionate need for security, which he satisfies by submitting to the authority of the conventional. In doing so, he invariably denies his passions which are a threat to his security. Thus, in contrast to The Acrobats, in which evil is

symbolized as a cosmic force, evil in Son of a Smaller Hero is the explosion of these denied passions in private perversions concealed by the facade of conventional life, and is the hypocrisy and deception inherent in this life. Noah negates conventional authority and exposes its inherent hypocrisy, but he also creates confusion tending toward chaos by disrupting the order this authority provides.

The organization of the novel into seasons projects both cyclical and linear motion, which relate subtly to the tension between conventionality and its disruption. Cyclical motion is the motion of conventionality perpetuating itself without any change in its essence, just as the ritual of the Adler family meetings continue, and just as Melech, who lays down the law to his family, is as bitter at the end of the novel as he is at the beginning. Just as linear motion occurs in time, within the recurring seasons, so it is change within the context of what does not change, just as Noah transforms his Jewish identity but cannot step outside his Jewishness, and just as Vivaldi's The Four Seasons is perpetually beautiful, but particularly liberating and transforming to whomever it affects.

To an extent, people are what shapes them. And in Son of a Smaller Hero, people are the unique embodiments of their environments, inter-related by the social bonds between them

and by their common need for order. Thus, just as the shuffled scenes of The Acrobats project the performance of particular lives within the tumbling pattern of the human condition, so the shuffled scenes in Son of a Smaller Hero, as they shift from the teeming Jewish ghetto, to the Adler household, to Theo's apartment, to Noah and Miriam, to Noah alone, project Noah as a unique individual, whose individuality both is different from and similar to, and both influences and is a product of, who and what are around him. Moreover, just as the plot in The Acrobats is the particular working out of universal human nature in time and place, so, in Son of a Smaller Hero, the social setting becomes embodied in plot to express how the environment is embodied in those living in it. Thus, after the first long and excellent description of the ghetto, the narrator moves to the specific plot detail: "On that Sunday morning in the summer of 1952...Melech Adler...sat ...considering the prospects before him" (p. 18). Max personifies the Jewish "nouveau-riche." The union of the Jews "with the great prime minister in the great fight against communism" finds expression in Shloime's heroic struggle against the red menace. Indeed, "Shloime's speech was an incongruous mixture of newspaper editorials, army lectures and ghetto fear... Shloime had found his level. He was a fully adjusted member" (p. 209). Just as "the old men sipped...tea on their balconies,"



(p. 16) so Melech sits "on the kitchen chair on his balcony" (p. 18). And at exactly the same time that Noah feels the "shifting of the ghetto sands," he feels "a need to re-define himself" (p. 203).

"Defining...Against" (p. 203) secures identity in Son of a Smaller Hero, and underlies the divisiveness and enmity so pervasive in the novel. Defining against involves stereotyping, thus objectifying, the existence of the other, and is tantamount to a cowardly fear of self. As René Lafarge puts it:

So if the Jew did not already exist, we would invent him. Americans...have... the Negro who symbolizes in their mind the evil of humanity. It is always this same desire to shift onto someone else the responsibility we are refusing.<sup>12</sup>

Both Jews and Gentiles consolidate their identities at the expense of each other. Thus, Melech tells Panofsky, "What, tell me, do Yoshke's children do on New Year's? Drunk they get—like pigs... So they got the nerve to call us dirty Jews. Why? We're too smart for them, that's why" (p. 91). And though Panofsky argues that "a Jew is no smarter and no dumber than a Goy" (p. 91), he sees the world as a struggle between communists and capitalists. Within the ghetto itself, enmity broods between the religious and the non-religious, between families, between classes and between generations; and the military imagery and the violence convey this enmity. Noah's

family "presented a solid front to the Goyim" (p. 40); and Noah "had threatened to report uncles and cousins for war profiteering" (p. 40). Shloime and his gang rob and nearly kill Panofsky; and Shloime eventually joins the army. In sharp contrast, Noah and Miriam overturn temporarily ethnic, generational and conventional barriers in their love; and Noah, in his search for identity, requires, like André, "a bigger reply than No" (p. 203).

Melech, the overbearing father and the father-figure against whom almost everyone in his family rebels, embodies the way of life of the first-generation Jews insofar as he typifies them. Intensely patriarchal, stern and unmerciful, his is the Old Testament God who he creates in his own image: "Each man creates God in his own image. Melech's God...was ...stern, just, and without mercy" (p. 44). Exemplary in defining against, his cowardly hatred of the "Goyim," defines his own limited self-definition, as he allows the way he thinks the Gentiles see him, control the way he sees, and acts toward, them, and as he uses them to justify his own dishonesty: "Wolf Adler died because his father was a coward and allowed the Goyim to define him" (p. 216). Indeed, he personifies Isaac Deutscher's comment that:

In this period of history...is not Jewish consciousness a reflex...of anti-semitic pressures? I suppose that if anti-semitism

had not proved so terribly deep-rooted, persistent and powerful in Christian civilization, the Jews would not have existed...as a distinct community.<sup>13</sup>

Again in sharp contrast, Noah does not want to need enemies the way his "grandfather needs the Goyim" (p. 31).

Rationalizing his desire for revenge as a desire to avenge, Melech desires to punish Noah for puncturing his sense of himself: "Melech's God...would reward him and punish the boy" (p. 232). Thus, since Melech creates God in his own image, his God of justice is in actuality his own self-justification. Naim Kattan is inaccurate, therefore, when he suggests:

Noah is...right to rebel against parents who exploit authentic traditions... Fortunately, the grandfather is there to remind one that this religion which his unscrupulous children have debased had... a truth that has...been obscured and concealed.<sup>14</sup>

The inaccuracy lies in the fact that Melech exploits authentic traditions as much as his children do, and in the fact that Noah rebels against his grandfather at least as much as he does against his parents. That Melech's laws can be overturned is a measure of the tenuousness of the authority which is their source, since a law is a rule of action sustained by authority. The imagery of yellowing decay associated with Melech suggests the decay of the way of life he has enforced;

and since Melech's authority derives from the God he believes in, the decline in his authority is at one with a decline in the acceptance of God as a source of authority. This leads to the heart of one of Richler's major concerns: without God as an absolute source, from where does authority derive? And if "laws in order to be true only required followers" (p. 40), what laws does one follow, and how does one avoid being merely a follower?

While the social worlds of the Jews and Gentiles are posited against each other, the need for order underlies and inter-relates both worlds, which, in their distinctiveness, reflect distinct ways of satisfying this need. Miriam's chaotic past dictates her passionate need for order which is simultaneous with her need for passion. Indeed, just as the tension which springs from the irreconcilability between the need for security and the need for passion is central to the novel, and just as character can be seen as a thematic construct, so Miriam lives out this tension as she veers sharply from staid, repressive security with Theo to passionate fulfillment with Noah to the lack of either in her pathetic degeneracy. Theo comes from an excessively ordered past which results in him hurrying "through his days trying to catch up with his self-imposed schedules" (p. 81). His use of "the word Art like a man at his prayers" (p. 46) is

parallel to Melech's need for religion because "Freedom was too much for man" (p. 72). Indeed, ironically, Theo's atheism parallels Melech's orthodoxy: "belief or non-belief amounts to the same thing in the end. He is still a factor in their thinking" (p. 72). Further, just as Noah's candid forthrightness is disruptive to the caged-in Jewish world, so he similarly disrupts the Halls' caged-in world: "He sensed that Miriam and Theo were united against him in the same way as Melech and Wolf had joined forces much earlier" (p. 119). And he reflects that "this society has as little veracity..." as "the one that I have sprung from" (p. 119).

Because people's passions explode in their private perversions, deception is crucial to decorum. Melech's strongbox, which he keeps locked in a safe in an inner office, objectifies this deception; and its hidden contents reveal the unorthodox preoccupations which throb beneath his orthodoxy. Similarly, Wolf keeps a coded diary, a record of the "terrifying banality" of his life, in a false-bottomed drawer;<sup>15</sup> and just as the letters in the diary are "elaborately formed," (p. 200) so each of Melech's scrolls "had been laboriously formed (p. 160). That Noah reads of this banality just while the "Ethel Gordon Chapter of Hadassah" proposes to send a fully equipped ambulance to Israel in memory of his father, is, of course, a measure of the gap between appearance

and reality. More disturbing, however, is the gap between conscious behaviour and the psychic depths beneath it. The unconscious side of Noah's attempt to escape from his mother is conveyed by the boat and water imagery. For just as water surface is an archetype of consciousness, and just as underwater is an archetype of the unconscious, and just as oars have phallic associations, so, when Noah falls asleep during "Shivah," he dreams "of his ship being pulled back into a whirlpool" and of himself rowing "madly with both oars. But the oars were broken" (p. 178), and so, just after agreeing to move back in with his mother, "The broken oars burst free of their locks. The boat itself broke up underneath him. And Noah, who did not call out for help felt the waters close over him" (p. 185). Just as the arc, which Noah's name implies, symbolizes preservation, so Noah saves himself, gets back in his boat, when he sails for Europe.<sup>16</sup>

At the level of conscious behaviour, the gap between appearance and reality crystallizes in Wolf Adler's funeral;; and it is plausible that the casket, which contains the lie of his martyrdom, is an extension of the strong-box and the false-bottomed drawer. In the description of the funeral, more than any place else in the novel, the narrator deneutralizes himself to become ironic, derisive, satiric and grim,

and to incorporate a great many points of view, as the texture of the crowd is made graphic by the brilliant depiction of the mourners' speech and behaviour. The funeral itself is at once a literal funeral, a ritual by which a people perpetuates its identity, which is to say in this case, a farcical ceremony by which it perpetuates its own lies, and, from the most distant perspective, an attempt to create order in an indifferent universe: "Away, far away, the city was a grey pulpy mass looming incoherently out of the hot brown earth" (p. 167). As satiric irony provides a double vision by distorting the normal to expose its folly, so the satiric irony running through the description of the funeral exposes sharply the folly there, its likeness to an entertainment spectacle. As Aaron Panofsky, whose point of view can be respected, comments, "I don't go to the circus to tease the lions. I go to watch" (p. 166). His father summarizes the truth about the funeral, and his thoughts further demonstrate Richler's embodiment in plot of what is universal in the world of his novel: "a small man died for nothing in a fire in a time from big, big bombs and made for us a smaller hero than we usually put up" (p. 176). The imagistic link between "bombs" and "fire" implies that the universal context of "a time from big, big bombs" manifests specifically in the incident of the fire; and that a small man dies for nothing makes clear the

alienation and nihilism implicit "in a time from big, big bombs." Further the precise contrast between "a small man" who is "a smaller hero" and "big, big bombs" suggests that just as the enlargement of Wolf's "heroism" is a measure of the moral smallness of the Jewish community, so the very largeness of the bombs is a measure of the moral smallness of the time.

Noah's simultaneous repulsion and involvement during the funeral is part of his paradoxical relation to his Jewishness. While, as he is to discover, he can never reject his Jewishness, he does reject, and try to work past, the conventional Jewish identities, whether rooted in God, Israel, Marx or gold. This rejection makes him an outsider; and that he is an outsider, and that he is constantly on the move, are the conditions of his search for meaning, and are a precise contrast to the description of a society imprisoned within its limited perception of itself. The idea of a ghetto immediately suggests restriction, and as setting is embodied in plot, so the imprisoning restrictiveness of the Jewish ghetto is embodied in the Adler household: "The Adlers lived in a cage" (p. 39). Noah is free to the extent that he has "flung open the door to the cage" (p. 40), and to the extent that he faces anguish, itself provoked by the terrifying insecurity of freedom. Thus, in the flashback to the Labor Zionist meeting, he is estranged because he refuses to abdicate freedom and consciousness,



refuses to define himself against, and refuses to lose himself in something larger than himself:

The deal had been made...intelligence, could be done without. The enemy...had been shaped ... They seemed to shed their individuality like unwanted skins, trading in anguish and abandoning freedom for membership.

(pp. 29-30, italics mine)

Though Noah sees himself, after the flashback, as being "like that yellow bulb overhead, weak, nameless and swaying..."

(p. 31), an image somewhat similar to the image of the film in "Frost at Midnight," his very weakness and namelessness are, as they are for Andre Bennett, his strengths. The apparent strength of those around him is in actuality their weakness, just as a lie is "the strength that holds the Goldbergs together" (p. 205).

The paradox that Noah's weakness is his strength is part of the more general paradox that people must confront the worst about themselves, must accept their limitations, in order to begin to fulfill themselves. As Wallace Stevens writes in "The Poems of our Climate", "The imperfect in our paradise / ...in this bitterness, delight, / Since the imperfect is so hot in us, / Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds."<sup>17</sup> Wolf's "martyrdom" really means that he "had been swindled...by death" (p. 212). And only by stripping his father of his false heroism, by being true to the reality that he is indeed the son of a smaller hero, can Noah continue to move in a positive direction. The necessity of

accepting limitations is movingly expressed in the scene in which Noah asks Melech for one of his scrolls. Though Melech protests that they are not well done, Noah replies, accepting the flawed scrolls with love, "You have given me what I wanted" (p. 231). Further, just as self-realization must involve anguish, so self-concern, necessary to individual self-realization, strains against human relationship which demands self-sacrifice for the sake of the larger self which in turn threatens to overwhelm individuality. As Noah thinks, "It is necessary, at times, to hurt others" (p. 28); and, as he asks Miriam, "how far do you think two people can really go" (p. 134). Thus, that Noah's "ruthless" self-concern leads to his mother's death and Miriam's degeneration (for which he is not to blame) dramatizes the price self-concern exacts.

These paradoxes make sombre the novel's ending. Noah's progress is inextricably tied to the ruin which is its result. The tension here runs through the heart of the novel's view of the world, a world in which people are so dishonest and cowardly that an honest individual's growth necessarily harms others who in turn limit its possibilities, a world so corrupt that to restore to a smaller hero his rightful greed and mediocrity is to redeem him.

The Acrobats ends on a note of hope, however desperate; and Noah refuses to define himself against, whatever the cost.

In Richler's third novel, however, as its title suggests, survival necessarily involves making a choice of enemies. That is, in contrast to a world of infinite possibilities which constitute the source of man's anguish and potential greatness, the world of A Choice of Enemies is so circumscribed that choice, which is a necessary condition for freedom, is shackled by negativity, that, because man makes himself by choosing, and because to choose an enemy is to become an enemy, defining against is the very ground of man's identity.

The world of A Choice of Enemies is so rife with human frailty as to be meat for a satirist; but Richler, working within verisimilitude, presents this world in its own terms, not through the agency of fantasy.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, just as Sartre has suggested that the "'white style'" of The Stranger "—impersonal, expository, lucid, flat—is itself the vehicle of Mersault's image of the world (as made up of absurd, fortuitous moments),"<sup>19</sup> so the detached, sardonic narration in A Choice of Enemies is similarly appropriate to the world it describes. The detachment, empty of sympathy and emotionally distancing reader from character, is not only the vehicle of Norman Price's image of the world, but also expresses how depersonalized and alone the characters are, and how barren their world is. The sardonicism fixes them in their

ridiculousness: "I'm decadent, he thinks. Me, Norman thought, decadent. Jesus. Feeling better he went out for a walk" (p. 20). The matter-of-fact narration which fragments thoughts, speech and behaviour into jerky details—"They went back to their room and unpacked. Sally wept" (p. 150)... "Sally walked" (p. 131)... "Norman felt stupid" (p. 153)—expresses how people are automaton-like, their actions reflexes; and Ernst exemplifies this when he methodically and mechanically kills Nicky. So encompassing is the dry, detached narration, that it seems inaccurate to suggest the characters take form "through the inner drama of dream and hallucination."<sup>21</sup> For, in contrast to The Acrobats, in which André's nightmarish paranoia is commensurate with nightmarish paranoia of his world, and provides a distinct and terrifying way of seeing that world, in A Choice of Enemies, "dream and hallucination" are rendered prosaic: "Sally woke again at three a.m. when Ernst let out a wild scream. He had had a bad dream, he said. He was feverish with a tendency to tremble, but he gradually quietened down. He fell asleep with his head on Sally's breast" (p. 114).

It might seem that Karp "belongs not to the world of verisimilitude, but to the world of fantasy."<sup>22</sup> That his deformed body, dwarfishness, ambiguous sexual nature and lust for malice place him solidly in the tradition of the grotesque

would seem to substantiate this. The point is, however, that Karp is what the war has done to him, and that it is not beyond belief that the war can so distort a man. Moreover, Ariele Sachs notes that "Modern psychologists use 'grotesque behaviour' as a technical term to describe a certain type of schizophrenia whose symptoms are theatricality, exhibitionism and incongruous gestures."<sup>23</sup> This neatly describes what might amount to Karp's schizophrenia resulting from his futile attempt to negate his Jewishness, for the symptoms Sachs mentions are excellent descriptions of his behaviour. Still further, just as Karp objectifies human depravity, just as his meddling objectifies the expatriates' meddling, so his grotesqueness is strewn about the novel's background in, for example, descriptions of "A hunchback in a corduroy cap with a smile like a clenched fist" (p. 51), "A non-objective painter with the necessarily rotten teeth" (p. 68), and "an obese art critic with stinging red eyes" (p. 68). To quote Sachs again, "Only in the world of blasted expectation and reversed nature...does the grotesque become the norm."<sup>24</sup>

In The Acrobats, Richler embodies universal human nature in plot to show how men define, and are defined by, it; and in Son of a Smaller Hero, he embodies setting in plot to show how men define, and are defined by their environment. In A Choice of Enemies, character and action are the concretization

of the effects of the political ideologies which have shaped the novel's world. Thus, just as Norman has once told Joey that "Ernst was...the creation of their own idealism" (p. 254), so Ernst, the product of what Nazism and Communism have done to him, personifies the reality behind the expatriates' flabby idealism, and so his nihilism is the articulation of that reality. The intricacy of the plot closes the gap between what is professed and what is by dumping what is on the lap of the professor. Thus, for example, to the extent that Norman's idealism has created the chaos which "made a necessary sacrifice of the Nickys and Sallys" (p. 254), "he is responsible for his brother's death (indeed, more responsible morally than Ernst). And when he confronts Ernst about his brother's death, he is actually confronting his own guilt. As defining against involves the desire to shift on to someone else the responsibility man refuses, so he eagerly receives Ernst as his enemy, his hatred giving him something to live for again (p. 221).

While the setting of an exhausted, war-torn Spain in The Acrobats is somewhat counterpoised by the youthful integrity of André Bennett, in A Choice of Enemies, the enervated post-war setting finds its correlative in the thirty-eight-year-old protagonist who is "thickening around the waist" (p. 10).

Sodden, gray rainy London objectifies the world-weariness Norman Price feels: "Greatness and power and youth had passed: the city, like you, was relieved" (p. 11). The London of this novel recalls the London of The Wasteland; and, as it does, it becomes part of a particular literary tradition whose world-view is one with the world-view of the novel. As Irving Howe suggests, "Life in the city is shackled to images of sickness and sterility...and what seems finally at the base of this tradition is a world-view we might designate as remorse over civilization."<sup>25</sup> Further, London is an alien city to aliens not at home anywhere in the world. The expatriates, Norman comes to realize, "were aliens like himself" (p. 156). Ernst, without papers, and Sally, because of her love for him, "have to flee to another country...Fugitives" (p. 146). And Karp, after resigning himself to his Jewishness, is not trusted in Israel because he is a survivor. All the walking and running in A Choice of Enemies is the motion of the aliens' rootlessness.

That the images of sickness which Irving Howe mentions are everywhere in the novel underlines the relevance of his comment. These images, which anticipate the illness motif in The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz, suggest diseased physical and spiritual life in a sick world. Malcolm Greenbaum's neck is bandaged because of boils; and, at one point, Joey feels

"the fear bursting like a boil inside her" (p. 142). In the "jazzkeller," "a body alone, like an open wound, was something to be quickly bandaged" (p. 26). And Ernst, who suffers from a cough, and has some vitality, is, at the end of the novel, immobilized in the hospital with a broken leg, easy prey for Frau Kramer.

Because A Choice of Enemies projects what might well be the worst of all possible worlds—"a time to weed one's private garden" (p. 253)—it is not only a political novel, or a novel about what politics does to people; it is as much, if not more, a novel about the politics of survival. That is, just as an ideology is a systematic rationale designed to serve a vested interest, and just as Norman is a fellow-travelling Communist, because Marxism gives "him the benefit of a code, of a system of responses, that was of singular value to him" (p. 114), so, at bottom, the expatriates' politic in the administration of chaos in order to serve the vested interest of their own identities. And just as politics implies power in the sense that "sexual politics" refers to the power struggles between men and women, so the politics of survival involves deprecating the enemy in order to gain a sense of power and superiority. Ironically, the expatriates' use of McCarthyite tactics equates them with the enemies they have chosen. When Norman takes Ernst's side, he violates the code which orders



his life, and, subsequently, feels, as Noah has felt, "The sands...shift under him" (p. 127), and fears that he will no longer know where he stands, "Or how to stand" (p. 127). After his argument with Sonny Winkleman, Bella sees him as "a threat to the whole structure of their happiness" (p. 127), "structure" here implying that their happiness has been carefully constructed, the "threat" implying its tenuousness. What complicates the politics of survival and is a measure of the novel's sardonic pessimism is that the fallen absolutes of God, Marx and gold have now been replaced by enemies who, in the past, seemed absolute: "But in those days, Norman remembered fondly, the choice of enemies had been clear. Today you were no longer altogether sure" (p. 76).

In contrast to the politics of survival which demands choosing enemies, the love between Sally and Ernst ("Sally's choice of a lover" (p. 157, italics mine)) exemplifies the attempt at humanistic survival. And in the descriptions of them together, the narrator, more than any place else, loses his sardonicism and becomes almost mawkish: "And there followed for...them a loud time of pleasure, discovery, foolery and dream-castles" (pp. 109-110). That their love is an example of what can lead to a positive reordering of things is suggested at the party—juxtaposed with Winkleman's parties—in which Karp's dour, lonely tenants, originally coming to

complain, take part, and in which Karp himself fails "to inject his customary chill" (p. 115).

Sally and Ernst are the precise opposites of each other. She comes from the ordered innocence of Canada and has not "been born yet" (p. 129); he emerges from chaotic experience in Europe, having "been brought back from the dead" (p. 215). Between the poles of her innocence and his experience, the argument of the theme pursues its dialectical course:

There's still such a thing as right and wrong,  
you know...  
There is no right and wrong. There are conditions,  
rewards, punishments, and sides, but that's all...  
No Ernst, if circumstances meant that much  
there would be no sense in living.  
Is there. (pp. 129-130)

And just as love itself is dialectical, so they change each other. Because of her, he begins to clothe his nihilism with moral concern; and because of him, pragmatic self-concern begins to crack the cocoon of her naive morality. Thus, when arguing what to do during Norman's amnesia, she tells him that he now sounds like a priest, while he chastizes her for wanting to run away. As they finally rest their hopes on their faith that Norman will forgive Ernst, and as his forgiveness would lift A Choice of Enemies out of its pessimism, so his response to Ernst is decisive in the thematic argument between morality and nihilism. And it is not the case that Norman has chosen his enemy too late,<sup>25</sup> for he is wrong to choose an

enemy at all. As a result of his choice, Ernst, like the young girl in the concentration camp, is "murdered a second time" (p. 215).

As the world of the novel is depleted of moral energy, and as it tends to kill off its young, so Norman Price personifies it to the extent that he lacks moral energy, to the extent that he is responsible for his brother's death and is, figuratively, Ernst's second murderer, and, generally, to the extent that he has made this world and has been made by it. Like his world, whatever has been best about him is far behind him: a former bomber-pilot, a decorated hero, he now writes thrillers, and has resolved, because he is an amnesiac, to keep his life free of disturbances. Unlike André, whose integrity flows from his willingness to dirty his hands with the world as he dies with "his fingers digging into the mud" (p. 177), Norman's "hands are clean" (p. 153), his restraint and cold aloofness the means of his resolve. A man of his time—a time too enfeebled and corrupt to sustain its young, the descriptions of him as an old, not quite middle-aged man make clear the oneness of his and his world's enfeeblement. After discovering that Sally has chosen Ernst as a lover, he feels "old. Very old" (p. 83); and, at the end of the novel, he sees that he is "an ageing pinko...and, as far as Haig's

crowd could see, the fossil of a sillier age" (p. 253).

Again, just as Norman embodies a world of limited alternatives, so the pattern of his movement in the novel, which could be traced step by step, is a progressive loss of identity, as he increasingly loses his friends, and, as mentioned, increasingly feels the sands shift under him and increasingly forgets where and how to stand. This pattern begins with his first meeting with Hale who jars his sense of himself and culminates in his fit of amnesia, during which he is totally estranged from himself and his surroundings. His loss and rediscovery of self during and after his amnesia fits into the archetypal pattern of death and rebirth. That the overwhelming pressure of events causes his attack is in line with Maud Bodkin's notion that the "deep organic need for release from conflict and tension" is fundamental to archetypal death.<sup>27</sup> And just as she suggests that this release "gives opportunity for the arising impulse of some new form of life,"<sup>28</sup> so Pip tells Norman, "Think of it. Maybe you were unhappily married. Maybe your boss gave you the sack. Maybe all your life you've wanted to make a fresh start" (p. 200). It is structurally significant, therefore, that just after he has been "reborn," just when he could transcend what he has been, he becomes the murderer in Ernst's second death. When Ernst loses his identity and becomes Joseph Rader, he

can do no better than fall prey to Frau Kramer.

In his perceptive interpretation of A Choice of Enemies, Peter Scott argues that Norman, emptied of his affected strength, is better for learning finally to live by accident, and that he and Vivian acquire a certain value in the life of the other, such that the book's "humble but haunting power" when "we are left with Norman and Vivian, poised on the break of an ordinary day" qualifies the barrenness of its theme.<sup>29</sup> But it is to be remembered that Sally has said that "If circumstances meant that much there would be no sense in living" (p. 129). Life reduced to circumstances means that the factors of life overwhelm man's capacity to order them. If man is at the mercy of circumstances, then he is at the mercy of accidents which are, by definition occurrences affecting a person, over which he has no control. Thus, if Sally is right, "to live by accident" is to live meaninglessly. But, more important than such semantics, A Choice of Enemies, like The Stranger, is filled with "absurd, fortuituous moments"<sup>30</sup> which drive life into senselessness, just as Ernst's accident in Montreal renders finally his life senseless. Further, Norman's final choice of an enemy is the world around him, because "The enemy was the hit-and-run driver of both sides" (p. 253, italics mine), his menacingness commensurate with Norman's choice of a private life. Finally, when the reader

sees Norman and Vivian poised on the break of an ordinary day, rather than seeing the value each acquires in the life of the other, he finds Vivian frightened by the difference in her and Norman's ages, and in despair at the prospect of a middle-aged life, and he finds Norman pouring himself yet a stiffer drink and thinking about Kate. While Norman's strength has been his weakness, unlike André and Noah, his weakness is, and remains, his weakness.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Mordecai Richler, The Acrobats (London: Sphere Books, 1970), p. 107. Subsequent quotations are from this edition and are cited parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup> George Woodcock, Mordecai Richler (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Sontag, p. 35. Susan Sontag also writes that "An artist's style is...the particular idiom in which he deploys the forms of his art. It is for this reason that problems raised by the concept of 'style' overlap with those raised by the concept of 'form,' and their solutions will have much in common" (p. 34).

<sup>4</sup> George Bowering, "And the Sun Goes Down," Canadian Literature (Summer, 1966), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Frye, pp. 134-140.

<sup>7</sup> W.K. Wimsatt, Hateful Contraries (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), pp. 90-95.

<sup>8</sup> Desmond Pacey, Creative Writing in Canada (Toronto: Ryerson, 1961), p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Salvan, To Be and Not To Be (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962), p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> Woodcock, p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> Mordecai Richler, Son of a Smaller Hero (London: Andre Deutsch, 1955), p. 107. Subsequent quotations are from this edition.

<sup>12</sup> Rene Lafarge, Jean-Paul Sartre, trans. Marina Smyth-Kok (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), p. 101.

13 Isaac Deutscher. The Non-Jewish Jew, ed. Tamara Deutscher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 46.

14 Naim Kattan, "Mordecai Richler: Craftsman or Artist," in Mordecai Richler, ed. G. David Sheps (Toronto: Ryerson, 1971), p. 95.

15 Woodcock, p. 26.

16 This pattern of imagery is especially interesting in the light of D.G. Jones' discussion of archetypal imagery in Canadian Literature in Butterfly on Rock (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970).

17 Poems by Wallace Stevens, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Random House, 1959), p. 94.

18 Woodcock, p. 35.

19 Sontag, pp. 16-17.

20 Mordecai Richler, A Choice of Enemies (London: Andre Deutsch, 1957), p. 11. Subsequent quotations are from this edition.

21 Woodcock, p. 34.

22 Ibid., p. 35.

23 The English Grotesque, ed. Arie Sachs (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1969), p. xxviii.

24 Ibid., p. xxv.

25 Irving Howe, "The City in Literature," Commentary (May, 1971), p. 65.

26 Woodcock, p. 34.



<sup>27</sup> Maud Bodkin, Archetypal Patterns in English Poetry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 66.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Dale Scott, "A Choice of Certainties," in Sheps, p. 79.

<sup>30</sup> Sontag, p. 18.

## Chapter Two

### The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz

The overriding pessimism of A Choice of Enemies continues in The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz, even though in Duddy Kravitz there is a marked shift in tone and style, a shift which indicates a new strategy for expressing this pessimism. Warren Tallman has outlined this shift very well:

The nightmare is still there, but it is not the same nightmare...the scope contracts... all...are caught up by personal disorders rather than world disorder, family strife rather than international strife, individual conflict rather than ideological conflict. And within the localized dream we meet an entirely different dreamer. We meet the direct intelligence and colloquial exuberance that is Duddy's style.<sup>1</sup>

The comic and picaresque forms within the novel suit "the localized dream," as "the pure sense of life," which is for Suzanne Langer the underlying feeling of comedy,<sup>2</sup> and picaresque dance of roguery combine in Duddy's "colloquial exuberance" and differentiate it from anything that has gone on in Richler's work before. Accordingly, a measure of the shift in tone and style, and of the self-consciousness behind it, lies in the transition from MacPherson to Duddy. That is, when the reader encounters MacPherson at the beginning of the novel, he finds himself in the midst of the nightmare of the

first three novels, in the midst of heavy drinking, frustrated idealism and crippling self-delusion; but then, almost as if Richler has somehow unburdened himself of this particular nightmare, he leaves MacPherson behind, as in Chapters Eight and Nine,<sup>3</sup> the focus finally centres on Duddy himself.

It is crucial to understand that, given a certain definition of the comic form, The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz is not a comic novel, but, as mentioned, a novel which contains the comic form. Northrop Frye suggests that comedy moves toward a happy ending which evokes the response, "'this should be,'" and that the society emerging at the conclusion of comedy is a "pragmatically free society" which represents a kind of moral norm.<sup>4</sup> These characteristics seem to inform much of William H. New's interpretation of Duddy Kravitz in his essay "The Apprenticeship of Discovery," in which he argues that the novel ends in a "comic triumph" because Duddy, "adult, individual, and master in his own terms in his own land," is on his way "toward inhabiting a new world and fulfilling a social individuality," his destructive tendencies a possible means of constructing life.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, this chapter argues that the society at the end of the novel remains what it has been throughout the novel, the antithesis of any moral norm, that rather than having fulfilled himself in his own terms and rather than moving towards a social individuality, Duddy

is finally absorbed into the negativity of the society around him, and that at the point of this absorption the comic becomes encompassed within the overriding pessimism. Interestingly, while comic action usually leads to positive social reintegration, it would seem that Richler's move to acrimonious satire and black humour in The Incomparable Attuk and in Cocksure, a move presumably at one with his growing social disgust, follows from this pessimism.

The picaresque world is a world of chaos governed by change, in which the picaro, the rogue-hero, usually of uncertain origins, is educated out of his innocence and into roguery during the course of his adventures, in which he is constantly on the move, overturning conventional norms—social barricades against chaos. In overturning these norms, the picaro defies conventionally logical cause-and-effect relationships, and the normally accepted demands of time, morality and social necessity. The chaos of the picaresque world is reflected in the instability of the picaro's personality and in his chaotic experiences; and, as the reader undergoes vicariously the shocks of these experiences, he feels the emotional effect characteristic of the picaresque novel—a disorganization of feelings. Generally, the picaresque novel is written in an unorthodox irregular style in order to reinforce the image of chaos it projects and in order to

enhance this disorganization of feelings.<sup>6</sup>

Richler purposefully disorganizes the reader's feelings by disrupting the smooth flow of the narrative, by making chance crucial to the development of the plot, by establishing then undercutting patterns of expectation, by shifting drastically the point of view, and, most importantly, by confusing the reader's response to Duddy as he is jarred from involvement to detachment, from admiration and sympathy to revulsion and pity, and to combinations of these. Indeed, Richler builds this confusion into the meaning of the novel as a reflection of the chaos of the novel's world. Duddy's ignorance about his mother is somewhat comparable to the traditional picaro's uncertain origins. And Duddy receives the typical picaresque education—"I come from the school of hard knocks" (p. 197)—as he is educated out of his relative innocence and becomes a successful trickster. Thus, when Warren Tallman says that Duddy is "a naive yet shrewd latter-day Huck Finn, floating on a battered money raft down a sleazy neon river through a drift of lives,"<sup>7</sup> he could be saying that Duddy Kravitz is a picaresque novel translated into twentieth century terms. The picaro's traditional adventures, say Huck's adventures, take form in Duddy's apprenticeship which, as the imagery in Mr. Tallman's statement suggests, is a training in the materialism which vulgarizes the novel's world.

Ultimately, just as the picaresque pattern of education into roguery by the world reflects more on the world than on the picaro, so Duddy's training in the materialism of his world reflects more on that world than on him.

Duddy's colloquial exuberance is one with the place from where he springs, a place "Where...boys grew up dirty and sad, spiky also, like grass beside the railroad tracks" (p. 46); and the jarring disruptions which disorganize the reader's feelings are in part a metaphor for this exuberance which is so disruptive to conventionality. Indeed, in the very sentence "Where Duddy Kravitz sprung from the boys grew up dirty and sad, spiky also...", the phrase "spiky also" jars against its smooth rhythm by straining against the smooth build-up of the adverbs as "also" replaces "and" and follows rather than precedes "spiky." The colloquial quality of "spiky" and the pungent simplicity of all the words in the sentence exemplify how the setting resonates in the language. Generally, the sheer vitality of the novel itself is an expression of the sheer vitality of Duddy's colloquial exuberance. And if, as Suzanne Langer suggests, drama abstracts from reality the pure sense of life,<sup>8</sup> then the novel in places, in its vitality, approaches the condition of drama. Thus, interestingly, while Duddy alone meets Dingleman head on, there is in the background a futile, chorus-like debate about

the Boy Wonder's mystery, which typifies the way Richler weaves the community's voice into the texture of the narrative:

they always brought up in a whisper the riddle of the Wonder's sex life... He was still capable. But some insisted he was now indefatigable and others said he had picked up some dirty specialities... Nobody really knew. (p. 133)

And, though Milton is turning over in his grave at the analogy, somewhat as the chorus in Samson Agonistes is a foil for Samson's heroic stature, so the chorus-like debate about Dingleman marks Duddy's superiority; and somewhat as Samson consistently rejects the conventional wisdom of the chorus' advice in his determination to do God's will, so Duddy's energy and commitment to his dream define by contrast the torpor of the world around him.

Richler internalizes the picaro's movement in Duddy, whose frenetic activity is the manifestation of his life-force. And the tightly-knit social setting of Son of a Smaller Hero, projected by its intensely visualized realism, tends to recede in Duddy Kravitz into a picaresque background through which Duddy moves easily. In contrast to Noah's more or less principled search for an identity with integrity, Duddy can move easily through ethnicity, religion, art and conventional morality because he is more or less unprincipled in his use of them to advance himself. In being so, he parodies those,

like Benjy and Lennie, who seem able to define themselves only in terms of labels—assimilationist, socialist, zionist, and who drift from one label to the next. Generally, while the novel begins with rapid shifts in narrative focus which suggest the shuffled scenes of the first three novels, and which project how various people and events affect each other, after Chapters Eight and Nine, when the focus is almost always on Duddy, who and what he meets in the course of his apprenticeship are significant principally in relation to how they affect him and how he affects them.

Richler depicts how Duddy's society perpetuates its identity through its rituals—the Commencement and the Bar Mitzvah. And just as rituals are formalized events, so the Commencement and the screening of the Bar Mitzvah film are set-pieces which express structurally their formality. Further, rather than flawing the novel's unity, Richler purposely uses these pieces to disrupt the novel's flow in order to disorganize the reader's feeling, and thus creates a formed formlessness. The juxtaposition of the set-pieces and Duddy's regular progress through the novel contrasts how society codifies the social growth of the members with Duddy's particular growth within this social context, just as the regimented movement in "The March of the Fletcher's Cadets" contrasts with his own frenetic movement, and just as the idea



of a beginning is common both to a commencement and an apprenticeship. As rituals generate definition by re-enacting traditions and thus continuing the past into the present, so the comic action within the set-pieces springs from the incongruity in the meeting between past and present; and, in this novel's world, the vulgarity of the present ultimately profanes the sacredness of the past. For one of the functions of ritual is to preserve those taboos essential to an ongoing society through the sense of awe that it invokes; and it performs this function by dramatizing sacred power, which in turn demands a clear distinction between the sacred and the profane agreed upon by the participants in the culture. It follows, therefore, that in a society which does not start with this fundamental distinction between these two realms of being, there cannot be anything like a meaningful ritual.<sup>9</sup> Thus, at the screening of the Bar Mitzvah film, where there is an underlying equation between the gross materialism surrounding the film and the profanation of a sacred ritual into a ritual of gift-giving, not only does the reader notice the comic contrast between the orthodox apprenticeship to position within religion and Duddy's unorthodox apprenticeship to his own identity,<sup>10</sup> but also and more deeply, he notices that both Duddy and the gift-givers are commonly and uncomically enmeshed in a society that celebrates its own

profanity.

This profanation of the sacred becomes clear when it is understood how Richler mockingly invests the world of his novel with a religious aura to express the profane's inhabitation of the sacred; and this anticipates the significance of the Star Maker as a twentieth century God. At one level, Dingleman, the Boy Wonder, is a God. In his ritual telling of the story of the Boy Wonder's rise to wealth and fame, Max thrives on the distinction between his meagre finiteness and the Wonder's godliness: "Now you or me MacDonald... We mere mortals, we'd right away put some of it in the bank... But not the Boy Wonder. No Sir" (p. 25)! The word "Wonder," therefore, connotes to Dingleman's worshippers divine power and divine mystery. To quote the background debate again:

they always brought up in a whisper the riddle of the Wonder's sex life... some insisted he was...indefatigable... There was the question of the girls...a rumor of incredible films, and amazing statues ... It was intriguing. (*italics mine.*)

Moreover, on "Schnorrer's Day...the supplicants came and went" (p. 14); and, most explicitly, "Mike Gold once said, "Dingleman sits like God in that office and this one, a regular St. Peter" (p. 135, *italics mine*). Richler playfully underlines this parody by repeating frequently the number three throughout the

novel in order to undercut its mystical symbolism of spiritual synthesis—the harmonic product of the action of unity upon duality, and its association with the trinity. Thus, for example, Dingleman begins his career by selling transfers for "three cents apiece;" Olive Drucker, his former girlfriend, has gone through three husbands and never stays in Montreal for more than three weeks at a time (p. 133); and Mickey 'The Mauler' Shub, "a regular St. Peter," has been knocked silly by Ike Williams in three rounds—"Three, you bastard. Three" (p. 135).

Depleted sacredness is clearly associated with Duddy's land—"God's Little Acre"—and is proof of the vulgarity of his dream. The intimation of baptism when he dives into his lake after seeing it for the first time is undercut by the scratches he gets on his forehead and chest (p. 97). And when he gets literally and symbolically lost during his second visit to his land, he recalls from "Bible Comics" that "Moses died without ever reaching the Promised Land," and thinks "but I've got my future to think of" (p. 212). While the comic drama of the green world, itself an archetype of paradise, celebrates "the ritual theme of the triumph of life and love over the waste land"<sup>11</sup> and while it would seem that Duddy Kravitz celebrates it when Duddy expels sterility embodied by Dingleman from his land—"On my land...no cripples" (p. 314), that

Duddy is eager to peddle the pine trees on his land at "Christmas-time" (p. 212), that what he projects for his land will make it indistinguishable from the mess which has already been made of Ste. Agathe des Monts (p. 71), implies that he will turn his "Promised Land" into a wasteland. This implication is reinforced by the circle imagery. While the circle can symbolize divine perfection, it can also, from a more mundane point of view, image the useless kind of activity that gets nowhere as in "going around in circles." Thus when Duddy gets literally and symbolically lost on his land, he "circles round and round" (p. 212). This intimation of useless motion is intended at the end of the novel when Duddy, finally realizing that society accepts him as a somebody, "grabbed Max, hugged him, and spun him around...his voice filled with marvel" (p. 319). The marvel in his voice suggests an awe as deeply felt as Max's awe for Dingleman.

Circular motion is also the motion of the wheel of fortune which swirls unpredictably around the poles of good and bad fortune and signifies a world of instability and mutability. And in the world of Duddy Kravitz chance itself frames everything that goes on. The narrator intimates as much:

Duddy...might have been born in Lodz, but forty-eight years earlier his grandfather had bought a steerage passage to Halifax. Duddy might have been born in Toronto, that's where his grandfather was bound for,

but Simcha Kravitz's CPR took him only as  
far as Montreal. (p. 46, italics mine)

And Duddy, on his way to Toronto to get Lennie, reflects, "if my grandfather had had another ten bucks in his pocket when he came to Canada I would never have been born here. I would never have gone to FFHS or found Lac St. Pierre" (p. 181). Indeed, just as the plots of Richler's first three novels are the working out in time and place of what is universal in their worlds, so the plot in Duddy Kravitz is the particular working out in time and place of contingency. The role that contingency plays in the novel is reflected in its importance to the development of the plot; and while E.M. Forster defines plot as "a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality,"<sup>12</sup> in Duddy Kravitz much of the emphasis falls on contingency. What George Woodcock describes as "the line of defeats that runs parallel to Duddy's stage-by-stage victory in winning his land"<sup>13</sup> suggests how success and failure follow upon each other's heels in a pattern which itself suggests the constant turning of fortune's wheel. Thus, "Duddy found the land he wanted quite by accident" (p. 67, italics mine). And just after the successful screening of the Bar-Mitzvah film, Lennie disappears: "just when everything is beginning to move. That's what you call luck" (p. 162). When Duddy is at one of his

low points, broke and hounded by creditors, Virgil appears with the slot-machines; and, conversely, "just when everything seemed to be going right" (p. 247), Virgil has his accident. That adversity and success are borne of each other is the fact of their inextricability, and underlies the hurt and destruction that Duddy's winning of his land engenders.

In an irreligious universe, fortune is in actuality the working out of God's will; and fortune's inconstancy can be overcome by faith in God's constancy. Contrarily, in Duddy Kravitz, the world of chance paradoxically houses a determinism which is apparent in the social and psychological pressures which mould Duddy and drive him compulsively to get money in order to get land in order to be a somebody. In this sense, his fortune is fixed, just as the wheel he gambles with at Rubin's is fixed. A.R. Bevan suggests this, when he writes that "Duddy...lives in a largely deterministic world...where decisions are not decisions and where choice is not really choice."<sup>14</sup> Just as Duddy hungers for fortune's shimmering rewards—money, possessions, status, so their lack of permanent value is one with the instability that haunts the novel's world.

Polio, heart conditions, cancer, epilepsy, impotency, complexes, nervous headaches, alcoholism and fevers crowd the novel in a frequency impossible to ignore. And this rampant

illness culminates in Dingleman's "personal trouble" which objectifies his moral degeneracy and the way materialism cripples the novel's world. For to the extent that he dominates peoples' ambitions and fantasies, and to the extent that they share vicariously in his success—"they...moved in closer, their fears and hopes riding with the Boy Wonder" (p. 26-27)—they are implicated in his disease. Moreover, just as they create and cling to illusions by refusing to see him as an ugly, cheap crook, so generally illness and illusion are inextricably, indeed causally, bound. Self-deception is shown to be corrupting and crippling as time after time the substitution of illusion for reality causes harm and even death. Thus MacPherson, for example, lulled by liquor and the flattery of being taken for "a freshly scrubbed idealist," succumbs to his old illusion and stays on at a party despite the urgency of his wife's condition: "There might still be nostalgic reunions in his parlour... Mr. MacPherson tip-toed into the bedroom, but Jenny wasn't there. He found her crumpled up on the hall floor" (p. 32-33).

In contrast to those, like Benjy and Lennie, who impose restricting meanings on a variable reality and thus falsify it with abstractions, Duddy meets this variability on its own terms and thus exposes the falsity of these abstractions. Just as he looks "thin and shifty," so he is able to shift

easily in and out of almost any point of view. This appears evident early in the novel when he criticizes MacPherson for not having marked the history papers or when he complains to his father about "the missionary who was going to distribute pamphlets outside FFHS" (p. 27). For he is not concerned about the intrinsic importance which these things may have; rather, he exploits to his own advantage his intuitive understanding of what conventionality regards as important: "on the distribution side, he was...building up lots of good-will...he showed films free...at...a Knights of Pythias evening for under-privileged kids or any charity event in Ste. Agathe" (p. 223). Duddy's exploits are comic insofar as they define a difference between him and what is around him, for only in terms of this difference does he carry out the fundamental comic action of pragmatic freedom's negation of the illusory, of, in Frye's terms, "whatever is fixed and defineable."<sup>15</sup> As this difference dwindles, so the comic significance of his exploits dwindle.

Duddy's easiness with reality is commensurate with his lack of meaningful self. To the extent that he does not impose meanings upon reality, he lacks meanings to impose. Thus, while he delightfully mimicks the clichés floating around him, he is also reduced to the emptiness he assimilates, just as his very dream is "somebody else's platitude" (p. 141).



When Hersh tells him that MacPherson is in a lunatic asylum, all he can do is echo Cuckoo Kaplan: "That's show biz, I guess" (p. 225). Psychologically, this lack of self partially stems from the sense of inferiority constantly thrust upon him. Lacking a mother and, therefore, doubly needing a father, he mostly gets from Max insensitive jokes, criticisms and lies. And from this point of view, the novel is a good study in emotional rejection, which itself lies behind much of his obsession with becoming a somebody.

While Duddy's easiness with reality lets him energetically play fast and loose with it, his energy also flows into his spontaneous morality as he rarely has to question his responses or weigh his feelings. Over and over again, he proves to be more generous, more loyal, more trusting, and more loving than anyone else in his world: "A friend is a friend. You've got to trust somebody" (p. 81). When Ida struggles with her Freudian interpretations, wondering whether or not to return to Benjy—"I want to be clear in my mind about motives" (p. 238)—he cuts right through her mystifications: "He's your husband and he's dying. So!" Yet, considering the psychological impetus behind Duddy's ambitions, it is a measure of the novel's complex irony, of how Richler complicates apparent meanings, that Ida is not entirely incorrect when she tells Duddy that "The human personality is like an iceberg...

Nine-tenths of it remains submerged" (p. 239), and suggests that unconscious motives move him. Further, that Duddy echoes Ida when he tells Yvette, "You've got a martyr-complex" (p. 251) suggests how subtly Richler complicates Duddy and confuses any clear-cut response to him the reader might be forming.

Just as the comic differences between Duddy and his society are eventually encompassed by his similarities to it, so he shares in its false values and illnesses. His spells of fever after his first two visits to his lake make clear that his plans for it are disease-ridden; indeed, Cuckoo Kaplan, describing Duddy's first fever, articulates the connection between illness and illusion:

He seemed so sick like last night...I mean sick in the head. He went on and on about some lake he'd found and how he was going to build a whole town on it...isn't it awful that a bright kid like that should have to live on pipe-dreams." (p. 102)

The obvious irony here is that Duddy will begin to make his pipe-dreams come true, but the more complex and unsettling irony is that Cuckoo is more right than he can ever know, for while he defines Duddy's "pipe-dreams" by what he thinks Duddy can and cannot accomplish, it is precisely the novel's meaning that it is awful for Duddy to have to live on the dreams he does. Thus, again, when Max asks Lennie, "you're

a doctor....Diagnose. What's ailing the kid here" (p. 296), Lennie, diagnosing better than he realizes, replies, "He needs some money, Daddy" (p. 297). And at the very end of the novel, after Duddy has gotten his land, Lennie tells him that he looks sick.

Though Duddy's energy separates him from and defines by contrast, the torpor of those around him, and is the manifestation of his life-force, precisely his energy causes his recurrent exhaustion and nervous agitation, which increase as the novel progresses, and precisely his energy is the manifestation of his abnormality, itself a sign of the abnormality of his world. And while it is critically invalid to make a case-study of Duddy, he is, as Lennie, whose medical opinion can presumably be respected, tells him, "the manic-depressive type" (p. 314). His condition shows itself as swings from manic elatedness, talkativeness and irritability to the stupor, perplexity and delusions of guilt in the depressiveness of his break-down. Interestingly, the delusions of guilt characteristic of the depressive type partially answer the question of what makes Duddy run: "Run, run, always running...he can't even walk to his car" (p. 245). For Duddy seems to be running away from guilt almost as much as he is running toward something. Thus, his whole troubled past is implicated when he comes "charging out of a bottomless sleep...the alibi for a

crime unremembered already half-born, panting, scratching and ready to bolt, if necessary" (p. 176, italics mine). The guilt he feels about the death of MacPherson's wife is compounded by Virgil's accident and the forgery of Virgil's cheque; and so, after Virgil has a fit upon discovering the forgery, "Duddy ran, he ran, he ran" (p. 309). That "the telephone receiver dangled loosely" above Virgil just as it "dangled idiotically" above MacPherson's wife intimates the association between these events.

Complementing Duddy's complexity, Richler disorganizes the reader's feelings towards him by presenting him in different lights and from different points of view; and this disorganization is Richler's chief means of undermining the reader's expectations. In the beginning of the novel, there is little to contradict MacPherson's view of Duddy as a "delinquent," and little that explicitly prepares him for the kind of admiration and sympathy he will feel for Duddy. Yet, while these feelings indisputably grow, Richler never lets Duddy's limitations be forgotten, and, therefore, he consistently shunts the reader between sympathetic involvement and critical detachment. Thus, when Duddy brings Lennie back from Toronto, the reader is as close to him as any place in the novel; but, in the very next chapter, the focus jarringly shifts to Hugh Thomas Calder, and the reader is detached from

Duddy who is presented from the butler's point of view:

"Edgar described him as a thin, shifty boy. He wore pointed patent-leather shoes" (p. 194), the outlandishness of the shoes guaranteeing the detachment. Generally, the closer Duddy gets to his land, the more desperate and distasteful he becomes, and the reader is confusingly caught between his fondness for Duddy, which is as large as Duddy is vital and good, and Duddy's violation of the basis of that fondness, as when he causes Simcha to cry. That Dingleman reads Evelyn Waugh and reads, and understands the sentimentality of, Yiddish poetry is a further example of how expectations are undermined.

This confusion in feelings relates to the moral confusion swirling about in the novel's sick world in which Dingleman buys the truth for fifteen hundred dollars a day (p. 290). While Duddy feels guilty about MacPherson's wife and about Virgil's accident, the extent of his guilt is impossible to know, though MacPherson and Yvette would like to blame him entirely. Where, for example, does Virgil's responsibility for his own actions stop and Duddy's guilt in using him as a driver begin? Underlying this confusion is the fact that the distinction between good and evil is really not a distinction at all. For, while the paralysis of evil is clearly imaged in Dingleman, crippled and crippling, good itself, presumably at one with the impulse which creates, enhances and preserves

life, becomes paralytic and paralyzing, just as Yvette asserts her morality in her self-paralyzing decision to look after Virgil full time (she indeed has a martyr-complex), and just as Virgil's morality thrives on his misfortune: "it was a blessing in disguise...if not for the accident there'd be no Crusader. It might have taken me years and years to get going" (p. 275). In this sense, "good" is Satanic as it feeds insatiably on life in order to satisfy its appetite; and this is underscored by the paralysis both Dingleman and Virgil suffer from. The consuming power of "good" is further apparent in the relationship between Duddy and Yvette. Though he must run to live, to be creative on his terms, from the first time together, she is oppressively after him to slow down, to stop running. And just as looking after Virgil seems to fulfill her, and just as she is content when Duddy is playing scrabble with Virgil, so Virgil's condition symbolizes what she would like to turn Duddy into. While Yvette is deceptively decent, it is simply too easy to say that Duddy "has rejected the clear image of Yvette's decency,"<sup>16</sup> for, like Cleopatra, she kills with kindness.

Since "good" cripples as much as evil, it is impossible to hold meaningful values in the novel's world; indeed, in this world, it is get or be gotten. Duddy lives out this impossibility. Starting out as friendly and trusting, he is

betrayed consistently and is finally reduced to being alone: "I have to do everything alone now...I can trust nobody" (p. 317). Lacking sufficient friendship and lacking sufficient trust, he is forced to be ruthlessly destructive in order to get his land, and he is forced to swallow his guilt about what he does. For in a world so totally immersed in wrongdoing, guilt itself becomes a self-consuming emotion not satisfied unless it totally inhibits. Thus, in the guilt-ridden stupor of Duddy's breakdown, during which he dreams that he has "the mark of Cain" on him, and that "A leering Mr. MacPherson waited round every corner" (p. 258), he is rendered so inactive that even his toes get stuck. In his thematically important conversation with Duddy, Cohen, the successful businessman, helps clarify the issues:

it's not easy to earn a living... There's not one successful businessman I know... who hasn't got something in the closet... It's either that or you go under, so decide right now. You're going to drive a taxi all your life or build a house like this and spend the winters in Miami."

(p. 266, italics mine)

Cohen assuages his own guilt by making himself "hard." The only room Cohen enjoys in his fifty thousand dollar house is the kitchen where he can burp in peace.

Given the grimness of the alternative—"It's either that or you go under," Duddy rides dilemma's horns when he tries

to decide whether or not to forge Virgil's cheque. But, more deeply than this, although he does not realize it, he faces an impasse rather than a dilemma. For just as ironies, levels of meaning which people do not understand, consistently run beneath what they say and do in the novel, so people do not know themselves, do not know the implications and consequences of their words and actions. In the sense that Cohen's success does not make him happy, in the sense that materialism is crippling, whatever Duddy decides will box him in; and so his alternatives—forge and live one way, do not forge and live another way, are not really alternatives. And so while he chooses, his choice, as Bevan suggests, is really not a choice at all, just as in Measure for Measure, where the choice between Isabella's chastity and Claudio's life is in actuality a non-choice signifying how Angelo tyrannizes human possibility. One indicator of the impossibility of real choice is that Benjy's advice, which urges Duddy to choose from among his many selves and so become a man, is really pseudo-advice: "There's a brute inside you, Duddel...and this being such a hard world it would be the easiest thing for you to let it overpower you. Don't... Be a gentleman. A mensh" (p. 280). Not only is it clearly not within Duddy to be a gentleman, which alone makes the advice insensitive, but also, gentlemanliness itself is but a genteel



rationalization of the same illusions and illnesses which afflict the gentleman at least as much as everybody else, just as Benjy is sicker than most of those around him. What Duddy realizes, and what makes the advice facile, is that "It's hard to be a gentleman—A Jew, I mean—it's hard to be. Period" (p. 296).

In wanting to give Simcha some land, Duddy tries to establish the integrity of his dream, and tries to keep his business practices coincident with a private sphere of values rooted in family. As Simcha tells him, "You'd give me everything I wanted. And that will settle your conscience when you went out to swindle others" (p. 315). Just as the world cannot sustain meaningful values, so Duddy's unscrupulous means define completely his ends and alienate Simcha, although only through such means can the dream be made real.

Duddy Kravitz is comic to the degree that Duddy transcends, and thus negates, the strictures of conventionality by using them pragmatically for his own ends—that is, to the degree that "he is a free and natural spirit" (p. 9). But, again, while his commitment to his dream makes him, like Gatsby, superior to those around him, makes him almost a kind of "Great Kravitz," and while he has the guts to make his dream real, all this is delimited, just as the comic is delimited, by the fact that his dream is "somebody else's platitude,"

and by the fact that his society deforms him more than he reforms it, as the shoddiness surrounding him makes "floating on a...money raft down a sleazy neon river" his only way of travelling.

Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Warren Tallman, "Wolf in the Snow," in Sheps, p. 79.
- <sup>2</sup> Suzanne Langer, Comedy: Meaning and Form, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), p. 120.
- <sup>3</sup> Mordecai Richler, The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969), pp. 46-54. Quotations are taken from this edition.
- <sup>4</sup> Frye, pp. 167-169.
- <sup>5</sup> William H. New, "The Apprenticeship of Discovery," in Sheps, pp. 76-77. It must be noted that the context of Dr. New's essay involves a comparison of the structural parallels between Duddy Kravitz and The Watch That Ends the Night, and involves a consideration of how both novels can be seen as typical of nineteen fifty-nine attitudes. See also his essay "The Island and the Madman: Recurrent Imagery in the Major Novelists of the Fifties," Arizona Quarterly, (Winter, 1966) pp. 328-337.
- <sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive treatment of the picaresque form, of which the preceeding paragraph is merely a summary which itself is intended as a working definition, see Stuart Miller, The Picaresque Novel (Cleveland: Press of Case Western University Reserve, 1967).
- <sup>7</sup> Tallman, p. 80.
- <sup>8</sup> Langer, p. 120.
- <sup>9</sup> Daniel Bell, "Sensibility in the 60's," Commentary (June, 1971), p. 72.
- <sup>10</sup> New, p. 75.
- <sup>11</sup> Frye, p. 182.

<sup>12</sup> Forster, p. 130.

<sup>13</sup> Woodcock, p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> A.R. Bevan, "Introduction," The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz, in Sheps, p. 85.

<sup>15</sup> Frye, p. 169.

<sup>16</sup> Woodcock, p. 42.

### Chapter Three

#### The Incomparable Atuk and Cocksure

The Incomparable Atuk and Cocksure mark a fundamental departure from what has characterized Richler's previous novels. As G. David Sheps notes, Richler steps "from a dominant narrative mode of realistic characterization, verisimilitude of action and psychological plausibility to a dominant mode of conscious caricature in characterization, purposeful implausibility of action and fantasy in events."<sup>1</sup> This shift in modes is integral to Richler's turn to satire; and though satire defies succinct definition, just as Mathew Hodgart states that Northrop Frye "has...the best distinction between satire and other conditions of literature," so his description of Frye's distinction serves well as a working definition.<sup>2</sup> Satire, the art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous, is distinguished by its militant attitude to experience, by a content of at least "token fantasy" recognizable as grotesque and absurd, by at least an implicit moral standard, and, hence, by a double focus of morality and fantasy.<sup>3</sup> Generally, if verisimilitude can be simply defined as that which seems completely beyond natural possibility,<sup>4</sup> then characters and events in Atuk, by staying within the limits of natural possibility, are improbable but not fantastic

(token fantasy), while Cocksure moves into pure fantasy with the Star Maker and the cinematic life of Polly Morgan.

Though Richler's turn to satire in Atuk and Cocksure is evident, Granville Hicks suggests that the ending of Atuk goes beyond the bounds of satire by subsuming any moral norms, no matter how implicit.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the incongruity between the horror of Atuk being guillotined and the sound of him being guillotined—"ker-plunk," is black rather than satiric; and Twentyman, who hovers shadowily yet encompassingly in the novel's background, finally emerges undiminished and in complete control. His control becomes an immoral standard which diminishes, which defines by contrast the ridiculousness of those, within his grasp. It seems, therefore, that Twentyman represents for Richler an order of malevolence beyond the vice and folly which are the satirist's traditional targets—that is, a malevolence which cannot be contained by ridicule. And it is the contention here that wherever this malevolence rears its ugly head the satire turns into black humor, which can be defined as incongruity arousing laughter at cruelty, pain and death, and which implies a world in which horror and evil so subjugate moral possibility that moral sensitivity is turned inside out, and so that the reader's own black laughter reveals to him his own insensitivity and inverted morality.<sup>6</sup>

Philip Toynbee suggests that Cocksure is weakened because "it is quite impossible to detect the moral platform on which...Richler is standing," and suggests further that while "nobody wants...a solemn declaration of faith... that declaration is implied by the best satirists in everything they write...and...before Richler writes a really good satire he will have to learn not only what he hates but where he hates it from."<sup>7</sup> And Leslie Fiedler raises this apparent flaw to the level of interpretation when he proposes that Cocksure approaches "ultimate, absolute burlesque, i.e. burlesque that includes finally the book itself and its author, the sort of nihilism implicit unawares in all pop art, and consciously exploited in 'Pop Art' of which Cocksure is an example."<sup>8</sup> But this interpretation would appear in conflict with the fact that Richler so derisively criticizes pop culture, and would appear to make him no better, if not worse, than what he criticizes. The point is that while much of the satire in Cocksure derives from the incongruity between Mortimer Griffin's conventionality and the dizzying "with-it" world around him, as a moral norm is implicit in his conventionality—"I believe in the possibilities within each of us for goodness" (p. 221),<sup>9</sup> the satire and the moral norm diminish as he is systematically oppressed and destroyed,

as aberrance and grotesquerie, and aberrant grotesque malevolence prevail. For not only is the "with-it" world "with-it," but its very "with-itness" thrives blackly on pain, cruelty and violence, and finds its apotheosis in the Star Maker. As in The Acrobats, the malevolence which prevails in Cocksure defines life's absurdity: and the fantasy which encroaches upon the action of the novel, and upon Mortimer's attempt to get hold of some tangible reality, objectifies this absurdity, and objectifies how the God-like Star Maker, as a radical extension of Twentyman, reduces life to surface and chimera by manipulating and defining reality through the images he projects. And, as in Atuk, the satire turns into black humor as the Star Maker, who is savagely derided, finally emerges all-powerful, indeed deriving his power from precisely what makes him ludicrous and grotesque.

The kind of localization in Duddy Kravitz which Warren Tallman has described is extended in the parochialism of the setting and content of Atuk to the point of self-parody. The parochialism reflects how inbred, thin, and inane Canadian life and culture can be, how they can parody themselves. And while this is only speculation, and is not meant to rationalize the limitations of Atuk, it may be that Richler purposely wrote a limited book as an example of Canada, "Cut



off from American junk,"<sup>10</sup> producing her own junk, and as an example of consumer-culture art. Be this as it may, the puerility of Canadian life and culture is consistently set against the Canadians' inflated sense of themselves, as this puerility and their self-esteem measure exactly their foppish mediocrity; and their glorification of Canada is ultimately a self-serving means of masking their mediocrity, just as Seymour Bone, who is "Mr. Big" in Canada, and whose fame has its origins in the misunderstood attention Time and The London Spectator pay him, is afraid to go to the United States because of "Too much competition for him there" (p. 88). Consequently, much of the satire is high-burlesque, in which the ridiculousness of the trivial is exposed by being treated pseudo-seriously. This is why the novel is crammed with superlatives. "The Incomparable Atuk" is "the Noblest Canadian of Them All;" Jean-Paul McEdwen is "the most astute journalist in Canada" (p. 11); and Bette Dolan is "a legendary figure," because she has bettered Marilyn Bell's time by an epic fifty-nine minutes. Yet, in sharp contrast to the satire which so obviously cements the foolish into their folly, Twentyman's power and significance are commensurate with his mysteriousness.

Just as the satirist's emotional distance from his material is essential to his satiric control over it, so the

ironies running through the narrative are proof of Richler's detachment and control, and ensure the reader's detachment. The frequent use of ironic overstatement, as with the superlatives, is consistent with the high-burlesque; and to underline the reciprocal satiric relationship between glory in Canada, and a glorified Canada, in order to damn by praising, Richler basks Canada in the praise of the mediocre, and basks them in her praise: "if Canada loved Bette...it was also true she...loved the country" (p. 28). The great amount of external description further ensures detachment, and has the effect of establishing a distancing perspective; and when the reader does get inside peoples' minds, he encounters inanities and clichés which reflect their pettiness and their obsession with the pettinesses of their culture: "Good day. Leafs shut out Beliveau. Twentyman Pulp and Paper up three-quarters of a point... Bowels regular and firm" (p. 42).

Richler does not make the characters in Atuk largely "self-evident stereotypes...caricatures of familiar attitudes and behaviour patterns"<sup>11</sup> just to satirize these attitudes and patterns, but, also, to depict how complex humanity is reduced to the abstractions by which people are defined. And in this sense, these people follow from those in Duddy Kravitz who fall prey to the restricting meanings they impose upon reality. Richler uses the pervasive concern with ethnic and

national identity to expose the reductiveness and absurdity of these abstractions, especially in the intricate and numerous parallels between Canadian, Jewish and Eskimo chauvinism; and as Atuk finds his "fat smelly bear of a girl" in Goldie Panofsky, the apparent distance between Eskimo and Jew is greatly shortened. Further, almost every character is dominated by his sense of his social role, and by the mythology of the culture, and this helps unify the various strands of the plot. Before Atuk, Bette Dolan is unable to give herself to any man because she attempts to be what she symbolizes, because she believes she belongs to all of Canada. Jock Wilson, caught between his love for Jim-Jean-Paul and his sense of duty, sometimes even dares to think that "a country can ask too much of a man" (p. 92); and while "Jock was, to begin with...awkward, in his new role...it wasn't long before he learned to answer to his code name—Jane—with a bewitching toss of his gorgeous blonde wig" (p. 87). The confusion of sexual roles between Jock and Jean-Paul anticipates what is at once the confusion and union of sexual roles in the Star Maker.

The split in Duddy Kravitz between a conventionality locked into itself and Duddy's sometimes delightful sometimes reprehensible exploitation of it is magnified in Atuk into a yawning gap between the stupidity of the exploited and the

savageness of the exploiters. And while Duddy at least faces an apparent dilemma in having to decide whether to be ruthless and "succeed" or be caring and fail, in Atuk, the exploiters exploit heedlessly. Even more than in Duddy Kravitz, the ruthlessness essential to any degree of success is woven into the very fabric of the world in Atuk, from murder to the countless large and small ways people exploit and hurt each other for their own advantage, the macabre way Panofsky plays havoc with human life to support his thesis, or the way Gore's caricature liberalism depends upon human models as stereotyped and dehumanizing as the ones he so morally opposes: "Indeed, the Professor adored Jews and Negroes so much that he felt put out when they exhibited human traits" (p. 135). As this ruthlessness is so predominant, morality becomes nothing more than a hypocritical cliché—"We must love one another or die" (p. 52); and naive and innocent Bette Dolan, in her desire to help Atuk, which is a desire to help herself, to which Atuk helps himself by pretending to help her help him, lives out the hopeless confusion between moral impulse and selfish impulse, suffering from how this confusion is victimized by those not sharing in it.

While Duddy's energy and commitment confer value on his crass, culturally determined dream, and while he at least appears to make choices, at the heart of Atuk broods a

cultural determinism, manifest in the social and mythological engineering of Twentyman, so powerful that human possibility is tyrannized to the point that even the appearance of choice does not exist. Thus Duddy's energy and commitment, which are so profoundly captivating, are sharply parodied in the clichés which express the false romanticism of capitalism: "What you dare to dream; dare to do." "It's what you make of yourself that counts in this world" (p. 40). And just as the kinds of choices available are the test of the quality of life, and just as the capacity for meaningful choice seems to lessen in each of Richler's novels, so the lack of choice in Atuk is a counterpart to the caricaturized characterization. This lack is particularly reflected in Atuk's lust for luck, which defines the scope of his dreams and daring, as he runs from department store to department store hoping to win a free trip or be the lucky millionth customer. The irony, however, is that even luck itself is no longer much of a factor in life; its prospect is only an empty allurement for the empty. For on the other side of "luck," on the other side of the clichés, securely sits Buck Twentyman, who, born with millions, the personification of monopoly capitalism which makes free enterprise mean that only he is free to enterprise, is a "fearless gambler" because he can never lose. Like the house, the odds are on his side: "If the manoeuvre was typical of

Twentyman it was also, as usual, wholly successful" (p. 11). Luck as allurement, and Twentyman's utter control and savage heedlessness focus and culminate in Atuk's appearance on "Stick Out Your Neck" with its intimation of take a chance. As quickly as Atuk sticks out his neck, he loses his head.

Twentyman's power and control are reflected in the progression of the plot, which in its intricacy, and in Richler's brilliant control over its unfolding, is one of the most artful aspects of Atuk, and implies an analogy between Twentyman's control and Richler's control. Richler employs the particular technique of providing details which only later become meaningful, as when the reader only afterwards discovers that the "creamy-faced boy" and "luscious girl" who Rory Peel sees in the park are Jock and Jean-Paul; and, generally, Richler only gradually and deliberately unfolds the main concerns of the plot—the nature of Atuk's crime, and, most importantly, the nature of Twentyman's plans for Atuk. Consequently, a certain mysteriousness inheres in the plot which contrasts with obviousness and even heavy-handedness of much of the satire, a contrast which parallels the contrast between Twentyman's mysteriousness and the obvious folly of most of the characters. That details only later become meaningful expresses structurally how deception

is a way of life, how almost every character has something to hide which, in one way or another, later catches up with him; be it the truth that Snipes' morphine is aspirin, the disguises of Jock and Jean-Paul, Panofsky's secret research, or Atuk's crime. And the parallel suggests how the working out of the plot is the working out of Twentyman's control, just as he is the central force in the world of Atuk, and just as his deceptions encompass all the other deceptions. Indeed, just as Richler's "deceptions" encompass all other deceptions, so the control and deception both he and Twentyman practice suggest each other. Thus, for example, at the very beginning of the novel, the reader becomes part of the frustrated "curious, watchful crowd" which wants to find out about "Twentyman's dreadful equipment." And he stays a part of this crowd for as long as he is caught up in the enigma of Twentyman's plans. The title of Part 3, "This Was the Noblest Canadian of Them All," as a statement of what Part 3 is ostensibly about, ironically affirms the status of martyr which Twentyman fabricates for Atuk, and thus intimates how the progression of the plot is the progression of Twentyman's control: "I assure you everything is under control...everything will work out for the best... What we need is a martyr...and we shall have one" (p. 173).

It has been frequently pointed out that Atuk is more or less modelled upon Ingenu satire, in which an innocent is placed

in a civilized society so that its vices and follies will be magnified when seen through his innocent eyes. Woodcock is perceptive to comment that Richler departs from the model "to...show that there is no need to contrast our world with a mythical primitive innocence. Even a rapacious savage... can throw into absurd relief...our way of life."<sup>12</sup> And Sheps is accurate when he states that in Atuk and Cocksure "the fictional time is relatively static as the characters do not grow and change."<sup>13</sup> Yet, it is the case that Atuk, at first, and in particular ways, is somewhat of an innocent as he walks in unknowingly on Nancy Gore and her lover, as he wonders seriously what the secret is to being world famous all over Canada, and as, generally, like Lemuel Pitkins, he talks seriously the cliches of capitalist romanticism. And it is the case, although the psychology of his change is hardly given, that he does grow out of his naivete to become an "Eskimo Tycoon." The point is that, apart from the underlying equation between his cannibalism and the cannibalism of capitalism, just as he is shaped by his experiences in Canada, just as he is the victim of Twentyman's determinism, so Atuk, in his movement through the novel, acts out and lives (and dies) out what Canada and Twentyman do to him. This is suggested in the way he seems to learn from the deceit he keeps encountering, and in the way he brings his family to Toronto



and exploits their art, just as "The Twentyman Fur Co" has done to him. Both the underlying cannibalism and the impact of the cultural determinism crystallize in the parallel between Atuk's murder of his brother and Twentyman's murder of him. For while the parallel asserts the murderous equation between them, it also reflects how murder is the logical extension of the corruptness of the novel's world where ruthlessness is essential to success. As such, these murders blackly encompass and peer behind everything that goes on, just as, again, the plot inexorably moves toward Atuk's fated death which itself is simultaneous with Twentyman's ultimate control and success.

In Cocksure, Mortimer Griffin tries to cope with a world rendered absurd by a malevolence as metaphysical, mysterious, and menacing as the Star Maker himself. Again, it is the contention here that the Star Maker is beyond the range of satire, just as Richler's occasional sympathy for, and even identification with, Mortimer, who anticipates Jake Herish, violates the satirist's necessary detachment, and makes Mortimer more than just a satiric butt.

To take a particular New Critical approach, two of the blackest and most chilling paragraphs in Cocksure can serve as the axis of the argument for this contention, and, as such, are quoted at length:

Miss Fishman's mother, who had been roasted in the ovens of Treblinka, as had every other member of her family, was not merely another dry Jewish statistic, altogether too horrific, as they say, for the ordinary imagination to cope with. Miss Fishman's mother was in fact the one-millionth Jew to be burned, not counting half or quarter Jews or babies who weighed under nine pounds before being flung into the ovens. This made for a very, very special occasion, and in honor of it Miss Fishman's mother was accorded treatment quite out of the ordinary. For her burning, the furnace chambers of Treblinka were festooned with flowers and gaily colored Chinese lanterns. Just as today's presidents and prime ministers will sign historical documents with as many as thirty pens, passing them out as souvenirs, so Mrs. Fishman's gold fillings and other valuables were divided among extermination quota leaders from various concentration camps, who had been invited to Treblinka for the day. Thus, the burning of the one-millionth was one of the most ring-a-ding nights in the history of the Third Reich and to this day—the Star Maker himself assured Mortimer, once he got to know him—it is commemorated by survivors of that sentimental barbeque wherever they may be. (p. 40)

Then he told Mortimer how after the war was done but still a festering wound, he and his followers, a number of saintly Jews among them, had travelled to Germany to demonstrate to the world how love, and only love, would conquer hatred. They had cleared the rubble from the bombed parks and filled in the shell-torn fields. They had planted acres of wheat and corn and orchards and botanical gardens... They were sweetly bound by such reverence for life that they would not tolerate chemical fertilizers or sprays. But the gardens and fields and orchards bloomed, bloomed miraculously...it seemed to some that God above must have blessed the seedlings. Of course the knockers said no: they rudely pointed out that underneath the meadows and parks of Germany

there ran the most rare and nourishing of fertilizers—rivers of human blood and mashed bone and burned flesh. This fertilizer in fact was said to be so enduring that to this day, according to the experts, it accounted for the incomparably succulent asparagus of Schwartzwald and the recent fecund years enjoyed by the vineyards of the Rhine, thereby bringing dividends to gourmets the world over, regardless of race, color or creed. (pp. 42-43)

The analogy between the division of Mrs. Fishman's gold fillings and valuables among the "extermination quota leaders" and the contemporary practice of passing out the pens used to sign historical documents implies that the horrors of World War II continue in the present, and that the rituals of power politics—the passing out of the pens, are the celebration of these horrors. As the horrors of the past continue into the present, so the superimposition of the language of commercialism—"the one-millionth Jew" (as in one-millionth customer), and the language of hipsterism—"ring-a-ding nights," implicates commercialism and hipsterism, and thus the entrepreneurs and hipsters in Mortimer's world, in the perpetuation of these horrors. And the nature of their complicity is intimated in the description of human fertilizer bringing fecundity to the Schwartzwald and the vineyards of the Rhine, "thereby bringing dividends to gourmets the world over." Just as the gourmets profit from the dead, literally feed off them, so the entrepreneurs and hipsters perpetuate these horrors by their

celebration of violence and cruelty and pain, by the way their amusement and success demands the destruction of others.

The reduction of the horror of the roasting to a "sentimental barbeque," and the feeding off the dead, combine in the sentimental saintliness of Lord Woodcock, who, in tribute to his humanitarianism, is awarded "the Grand Cross of the German Order of Merit...on the playing fields of Dachau" (p. 175). A nazi of a saint, his saintliness is fertilized by the destruction of the war, just as his seeds of love and peace are fertilized by "the rivers of human blood and mashed bone and burned flesh." His perverse virtue exemplifies how apparent goodness in Cocksure, even more than in Duddy Kravitz or Atuk, is as vile as what it claims to abhor, and how evil is so overwhelming that it nullifies moral possibility and turns it inside out. This is made evident in the argument between Miss Fishman and Lord Woodcock over her assault on Fraulein Ringler who wears Mrs. Fishman's necklace. While Lord Woodcock's patronizing arguments that Fraulein Ringler was only a child during the war, that the Jews' own history of warfare should curb their indignation, and that Miss Fishman's assault smacks of nazism, seem reasonable and sound correct, and while they soothe and calm Miss Fishman, they also dehumanize her by smothering the existential validity of her feelings. For, given what she has suffered, it must be the case that she is entitled to her rage, although it is not morally justifiable.

The evils of World War II which continue into the present are particularly connected with the Star Maker; and the associations between him and naziam are proof of this connection. It is the Star Maker who assures Mortimer that Mrs. Fishman's roasting is still commemorated; and it seems that the sentimentalizing of the roasting is extended in the pronounced sentimentality of both Dino Tomasso, who cries over the low wages of the British postmen, and of the Star Maker who gets lost in a reverie while he reminisces about his Goy-Boys: "'Mini-Goy passed for an intellectual'...the Star Maker said, slapping his knee in fond remembrance...'He blew up...Grown men cried like babies. It was terrible, ghastly.' The Star Maker's head hung low" (pp. 165-166). The efficiency implicit in Mrs. Fishman being "the one-millionth Jew to be burnt, not counting half or quarter Jews who weighed under nine pounds before being flung into the ovens," reverberates in the Star Maker's "team of efficiency experts," which is headed by Herr Dr. Manheim and which works out of Frankfurt. And the title of the series for which the team provides victims—Our Living History, suggests that the evils of the past are alive and well in the present.

Some of the conventions of satire and the grotesque—the portrayal of evil through deformity, merge in the Star Maker; but, just as he is beyond the range of satire, so what is

ridiculous and grotesque about him is the very source of his evil strength. While the ideal tends to be characterized by proportion, harmony, serenity and beauty, the grotesque, as the inversion of the ideal, tends to be characterized by repulsive ill-proportion. And so, not only is the Star Maker the hideous culmination of Richler's grotesques, but also, as the inversion of the ideal, he most fallenly and most absolutely replaces the fallen absolutes of the first three novels—God, Marx and gold, which are increasingly replaced by the increasingly "divine" status of Dingleman—the Boy Wonder, and Twentyman—"Blessed be his name." Further, while sexual ambiguity is a characteristic part of the deformity of the grotesque, and while the satirist uses obscenity and body ugliness to reduce people to their basic common denominator, just as Ziggy Spicehandler splatters his filth on Joyce, and while much of the Star Maker's obscenity and ugliness spring from his transsexuality, precisely his transsexuality is the manifestation of his inverted godliness: "Since God, the first self-contained creator, Mortimer, I am now able to reproduce myself" (p. 236). As the inversion of the ideal, he also is the inversion of the mythical perfection that men and woman, split halves of a cosmic whole, are supposed to regain with each other. His consummate sexuality, which contrasts with Mortimer's impotence, is the fulfillment of his self-love rather than of

any cosmic love, and finds an emblem for its vileness in the coupling of the two snakes. The grotesquely whimsical side of the Star Maker which co-exists with him as a "figure of nightmare, the monster lurching out of dreams"<sup>14</sup> makes him at once the "'grotesque terrible'" and the "'grotesque buffoon,'" both inherent in the grotesque, since its essence is extreme incongruity:<sup>15</sup> "The Star Maker blew him a kiss and then pressed a buzzer for Miss Mott... 'Get me Tomasso'... The Star Maker explained... exactly what had to be done" (pp. 237-238).

It is commonly argued that both comedy and satire have their basis in the need for release from the tensions of authority's restrictions, since comic and satiric distortions of authority help provide this release, and since laughter itself is caused by the release of tension.<sup>16</sup> It is further argued that there is a comic and satiric impulse in all saturnalian rituals, which act out this need by inverting rank and propriety and which usually involve blasphemy and obscenity, and that, conversely, there is a saturnalian impulse in all comedy and satire.<sup>17</sup> As conventionality is a mode of social authority, so Duddy's disruption of its authority, his exposure of the arbitrariness which pretends to be absolute, generates comedy. And Richler lets the reader celebrate in this disruption until Duddy becomes harmful, which is the point when he is absorbed by what he has been disrupting. In Atuk and Cocksure, however, the pleasurable laughter turns

into aggressive militant laughter—the laughter satire arouses, and, as the arbitrariness of society is understood to be its puppet's dance in the hands of a malevolent puppet-master, into black humor—the celebration of horror. And while Duddy comically disrupts conventionality, much of the conventional to which Mortimer tries to cling—his belief in goodness and in common sense, defines the values his world grinds to dust.

Arieh Sachs points out that "Madness is a perennial concomitant of the grotesque;"<sup>18</sup> and the references to madness throughout the novel, and the madness associated with the Star Maker, reflect how he renders the world insane and absurd. The world's absurdity, however, is not ontological; rather, it stems from the fact that evil, knowledgeable of itself and meaningful and even harmonious unto itself, is beyond comprehension. Thus, just as the Star Maker's ludicrousness and grotesqueness are his strengths, so the madness associated with him is the measure of other people's failure to understand him: "'I don't believe a word of it. You're insane.' 'Fifty years ago would you have believed in men flying into space?' Mortimer didn't answer" (p. 236). Indeed, so overwhelming is his power, and so little is he understood, that people do not realize the extent to which they have been made



by him. For, like in Jerzy Kosinski's Being There, the world in Cocksure is a world of electronic derangement in which characters perceive life in terms of the images offered them and recreate these images in their images of themselves. Mortimer, for instance, "Conventionally handsome... Like the old-style movie stars" (p. 39), is largely what the Star Maker, "controlling the images Protestant America worshiped" (p. 162), has taught him to be. The Star Maker's Goy-Boys, therefore, not only define those who watch them, but also symbolize their plasticity and fabricatedness.

The fantastic Polly Morgan, who, as an extension of the cinema, is the inversion of McLuhan's thesis that media are the extensions of man, is fabrication complete, and "personifies" the Star Maker's reduction of tangible reality to the images he projects. Consequently, his triumph and predominance are implicit in her obliviousness to the reality of Mortimer's plight—"Polly... This is no movie. This is real" (p. 249). So successfully does the Star Maker blunt reality, that he is able to blunt the significance of death itself; and so, while Mortimer is about to die, Polly, conditioned by too many happy endings, believes the sun always rises, somewhat as Chance learns from television that death does not really mean the end of life. And as the focus shifts to Polly while Mortimer is about to be murdered, as the reader is amused by

Polly, he has no real sense of the significance of what is happening to Mortimer, and thus shares in some of her obliviousness, and is deliberately made to reveal his own insensitivity.

The Star Maker's narcissism and cannibalistic exploitativeness are diffused throughout the world of the novel. Somewhat as the Star Maker lives off others for his own well-being, so the cruelty and violence so pervasive in the novel are life's defining characteristics, because people are so steeped in themselves they need the lessening of others to feel their superiority. Thus, when Mortimer is first presented, he is at a meeting where a "big black African... his smile lethal" (p. 14) pleasures in calling his Anglo-Saxon audience "swine," and in calling for their liquidation; and, after the meeting, Mortimer has to persuade Agnes Laura Ryerson "that the Royal Shakespeare Company's latest venture into the threatre of cruelty" (p. 15) is not for her. Nothing flushes Mortimer's son "out of his room like a quarrel" (p. 24). Hy Rosen must beat up his wife, beat up stray gentiles, and see himself as part of a great Jewish fighting tradition to assure himself of himself. And in a world which cannot abide goodness, the latest "thingee" is the program Insult, in which the character assassination of decent people allows the audience to revel in their common shittiness.

The self-centeredness which is the source of people's need to assert themselves over others also manifests in their hyper-defensiveness, since the need to assert oneself is precise with a lack of belief in oneself, and since preoccupation with inferiority is no less self-centered than preoccupation with superiority. Self-assertiveness and hyper-defensiveness become part of each other, therefore, and make human relationship impossible. Their inextricability and this impossibility is made clear by the racism which abounds in Cocksure, and which has echoes of nazism. Again, the note of this racism is struck first in the argument between the African and his English audience, and its discordant tune continues in the simultaneously aggressive and defensive Jewishness of Shalinsky and Hy Rosen, in Rachel Coleman's anti-semitism, and in the way all of this combines to overwhelm Mortimer. While he begins with the firm conviction that he is unprejudiced, and while he goes out of his way not to offend, he cannot help but offend. Thus his innocent remarks to Hy Rosen about Shalinsky mistaking him for a Jew spark a feud; while he is at pains not to offend Rachel Coleman when he first meets her, which itself is patronizing, he inevitably earns a "Mother-fucker" from her. Indeed, so paranoid is his world, that not only can he not help but offend, but he is increasingly thought of as a racist to the point where he is

approached by lunatic fringe nazi organizations.

The narcissism, violence and cruelty, and racism focus in the treatment of sex in Cocksure, since sex, as such a fundamental and pervasive part of life, is an index to the quality of life. Narcissism permeates sex in the novel; and just as self-assertiveness is a means to self-assurance, so sex becomes a mode of self-assertiveness, and a way of consummating self-love rather than love of the other. The Star Maker, as mentioned, is most able to consummate his self-love: he is the most cocksure. Ziggy Spicehandler, who is relatively cocksure and absolutely self-serving, shares in some of the Star Maker's grotesqueness, and sheds some of this grotesqueness on Joyce when he cuckholds Mortimer, as the hair of her armpits begins to grow wildly in maggotty clumps. Since sex is a mode of self-assertiveness, and since violence and cruelty, as proof of one's power in the suffering of the other, are self-assuring, so violence and cruelty and sex consort as intimately as lovers, just as Hy's need to beat up his wife is one with his need to hurt her sexually: "'You're going to be too big for me. You're going to hurt me.' Hy's laugh was gargantuan, charged with menace" (p. 21). The politics of sex becomes a kind of nazism of sex as manliness and anti-semitism are given equivalence (p. 78), and as various ethnic groups, Jews and Negroes to be exact, assert their virility by

tyrannizing the virility of others, and find a victim in Mortimer. Rachel Coleman says much, when she says glibly but truly, "Because this world being imperfect...no ofay cat is capable of balling a black girl without paying for it" (p. 180).

Behind all of this, looms the Star Maker's control and exploitation. Thus the first subject of The Our Living History Series is found hanging from a chandelier "in a room replete with two-way mirrors, rhino whips, dildos, and other erotic paraphernalia" (p. 125). And the second subject, a "faded film star," is found dead from an overdose of heroin, taken supposedly because he fathered his fifteen-year-old granddaughter's child.

Befitting such aberration, Richler uses a kind of satiric reductio ad absurdum to show how people are overtaken by it. That is, as this aberration is behaviour gone extreme, and as it is a way of life, so Richler consistently places people and institutions in the absurd conclusions to which the behaviour patterns and attitudes they represent lead, such as the mad progressiveness of the Beatrice Webb School. And there is, consequently, a greater element of the grotesque and the absurd in the caricatures of Cocksure than in the caricatures of Atuk. Moreover, since people are largely defined by the images which the Star Maker projects, and since

people, as in Atuk, tend to be reduced to the abstractions which define them, life takes on some of the quality of a movie which has been seen before, and encounters among people are encounters among the patterns and attitudes they represent as much as, if not more than, they are human encounters.<sup>19</sup> Thus, for example, Mortimer and Rachel Coleman, when they first meet, act out typical white-black racial posturing, and are, "for an instant...suspended in time, like the frozen frame of a movie" (p. 25). That Mortimer, who embodies a norm against which the aberration can be satirically measured, is a caricature WASP who is the inversion of the latter-day WASP of eminence and power, and who takes over the Jewish role as outsider and scapegoat, is suggested in the movie Different in which he is "held in a frozen frame" with the word "WASP" scrawled in blood over his face.

All the aberration finds unity in its common effect upon Mortimer, who tries to live out his belief "in the possibilities within each of us for goodness" (p. 221), and who fights a losing battle against the fact that "life is totally absurd" (p. 192). And, again, as the validity of this fact overtakes this belief, overtakes Mortimer himself, the satire turns to black humor. Just as all the aberration is unified by its common effect on Mortimer, so his decline and fall is the central movement in the novel, manifesting in the sudden way his

apparently well-ordered life is overturned, in his impotence, in his growing feelings of madness, and in his increased drinking. His oppression takes two main forms: the way he is abused and exploited, and the way he internalizes this oppression in his self-doubt and self-loathing. So great is the abuse he suffers, and so intense does his self-doubt become, that, finally, he can find happiness only with Polly Morgan, for whom he can be a fantastic lover. Since sex is an index to the quality of life, Mortimer's sexual decline is precise with his personal decline. That his impotence begins just after he learns the truth about the Our Living History series demonstrates how the battering of his moral sense affects his sexuality. And it is the measure of his integrity, and the way the world smothers it, that while Rachel Coleman excites him out of his impotence, her anti-semitism revulses him and moves him to forego her. Further, the more he learns about the Star Maker's secrets, the more he tries to do something about them, and the more the Star Maker hounds him. The more he is hounded, the more distracted and undone he becomes, and the more he is taken to be mad. And while he increasingly tries to tell of what he knows, he is increasingly ignored and outcast. Mortimer's role as victim, the absurdity of reductive abstractions, and the nazi-like times crystallize in Shalinsky's unremitting view of him as a Jew. For to the extent

that the times oppress him, and to the extent that "A Jew is an idea" (p. 245), Mortimer is a Jew, and is connected with the victims described in the initially quoted paragraphs. This is why he can never satisfactorily disclaim his Jewishness, and why he becomes a part of Our Living History as he falls into the hands of the Frankfort efficiency team.

The progression of the plot in Cocksure is, more than anything else, the progression of Mortimer's decline and fall. Consequently, the technique of providing details which only later become meaningful not only helps create a structural equivalent for the working out of the Star Maker's mysterious control, but also for Mortimer's gradual penetration of the Star Maker's secrets, the cause of his undoing. The shift from the Star Maker and his plans for Oriole Press in Chapter 1 to Mortimer innocently living his own life in Chapter 2 introduces how Mortimer will be a victim of forces beyond his control, as it anticipates how the Star Maker will suddenly and unexpectedly upset his life. Indeed, the closing of the apparent distance between Mortimer and the Star Maker is a central movement in the plot. That Mortimer's troubles with Shalinsky and Hy Rosen begin just when the Star Maker spreads his tentacles to London reflects how Mortimer's immediately personal troubles are simultaneous with what he suffers from the Star Maker, and prepares for their inter-relation through



their common effect upon him. Consequently, as the plot progresses, Mortimer becomes increasingly entangled with the Star Maker, and his personal problems get increasingly out of control, the latter punctuated by the arrival and cuckoldery of Ziggy Spicehandler. It is precisely after his first meeting with the Star Maker that he learns of his wife's infidelity. Further, that Shalinsky's insistence on Mortimer's Jewishness intensifies as Mortimer is increasingly oppressed, and that Mortimer's attempts to disclaim his Jewishness intensify and still fail, underline the fact and nature of his Jewishness. Again, the shift of the focus at the end of the novel to Polly Morgan expresses structurally how Mortimer's death passes unnoticed in his world, just as Polly's transformation of his plight into another movie parallels Shalinsky's transformation of his denunciation of the Star Maker into another story. His death is the culmination of his futile struggle against the Star Maker, which is to say that precisely his attempt to be moral is the route of his downfall.

Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Sheps, p. ix.
- <sup>2</sup> Mathew Hodgart, Satire (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 31.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 31. Part of this definition is also taken from M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1957), pp. 83-84.
- <sup>4</sup> Frye, pp. 134-135.
- <sup>5</sup> Granville Hicks, "The Adaption of Atuk," Saturday Review (August, 1963), pp. 37-38.
- <sup>6</sup> For further treatment of black humor see Robert Scholes, The Fabulators (New York: Oxford Press, 1967), pp. 35-55. Hamlin Hill, "Black Humor: Its Cause and its Cure," Colorado Quarterly (Summer, 1968), pp. 57-64. Koji Numasawa, "Black Humor: An American Aspect," Studies in English Literature (November, 1967), pp. 177-193.
- <sup>7</sup> Philip Toynbee, "Cocksure," in Sheps, pp. 108-109.
- <sup>8</sup> Leslie Fiedler, "Some Notes on the Jewish Novel in English," in Sheps, p. 104.
- <sup>9</sup> Mordecai Richler, Cocksure (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), p. 221. Subsequent quotes are from this edition.
- <sup>10</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, The Incomparable Atuk (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963). All quotations are from this edition.
- <sup>11</sup> Sheps, p. xxiv.
- <sup>12</sup> Woodcock, p. 44.

- 13 Sheps, p. xxiv.
- 14 Woodcock, p. 52.
- 15 Sachs, pp. xxvi-xxx.
- 16 Arthur Koestler, The Act of Creation (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p. 22.
- 17 Hodgart, pp. 20-30.
- 18 Sachs, p. xxv.
- 19 Sheps, p. xxiv.

## Chapter Four

### St. Urbain's Horseman: A Summing Up

Richler has self-consciously incorporated elements from his previous novels into St. Urbain's Horseman, the longest and largest in literal scope of all his works. The amount of this incorporation, and the shift from detachment to an involvement which shows itself in the congruence between Jake Hersh and Richler, reflects how St. Urbain's Horseman is both a literary and a personal summing up.<sup>1</sup> Treated from the perspective of the former, while also being treated as a work unto itself, it serves well as the basis for a conclusion about Richler's work thus far. Informing this conclusion is the contention that the return to a "dominant narrative mode of realistic characterization, verisimilitude of action and psychological plausibility"<sup>2</sup> is essential to the accommodation of the growing pessimism of the previous novels, which itself found form in the move into the caricature and fantasy of satire and black humor. The word "accommodation," especially with its connotation of adjustment, is well-advised, for it is not the case that Richler has finally found affirmation.<sup>3</sup> Rather, the sources of his pessimism remain, and dark ironies are in tension with and qualify, the meaning and value Jake—

and Richler through him—finds for himself.

Using Jake's life in the immediate present as a base, Richler reconstructs Jake's past, as he does Andre's in The Acrobats, through flashback and through Jake's memories. By doing so, Richler is able to review the theme general to his first two novels, that of the sensitive young man's attempt at authentic self-definition, an attempt which demands the negation of those ready-made meanings which would otherwise define him. One immediate example demonstrates the self-consciousness behind this review. Just as Hemingway's influence on The Acrobats is clear,<sup>4</sup> so Jake, recalling his experiences in Spain, seems to slip into the rhythms of Hemingway's prose—"Grubby fishing boats were beginning to chug into the harbor. Gulls swooped hungrily overhead," and remembers feeling "very ghetto-liberated, very Hemingway."<sup>5</sup> More generally, Andre's nearly insane confusion in the face of a world rendered absurd by its malevolence—of which nazism is a manifestation—finds expression in the confusion and terrors which beset Jake, as he is a victim of nazism's legacy of trauma. And, as the depravity of the world of The Acrobats is the condition of its Godlessness, and as the idea of God's holiness is increasingly parodied in the rapaciousness of the Gods which replace Him, so the Horseman is said to have remarked:

the Lord is one...because our Lord has such a tapeworm inside him...that he can chew up six million Jews in one meal... So, the Lord our God is One, because Two we couldn't afford. (p. 265)

St. Urbain's Horseman encompasses the contrast between the homelessness of the exiles in The Acrobats and A Choice of Enemies and the tightly-knit social setting of Noah's search for definition. Jake is homeless in London in the sense that he is unable to penetrate it and get the feel of it; and the densely-packed descriptions of life on St. Urbain convey how St. Urbain has indelibly impressed itself upon him. Further, like Noah, Jake's Jewishness and his family in Montreal are an ineradicable part of him. Indeed, the cyclical movement in Son of a Smaller Hero, the movement of the past repeating itself in the present, is reiterated in the circle imagery of St. Urbain's Horseman. Thus, when Jake goes "to join his family in Newquay for the sabbath, just as years and years ago, his father had descended on them in fly-bitten Shawbridge" (p. 383), he thinks to himself that life is "A circle. A little kikeleh" (p. 383). As does Noah, Jake, in his youth, moves against the ghetto's "self-contained world," "ponderously searching for a better way than St. Urbain's" (p. 302). But if, in a sense, Jake, when he leaves for England, is Noah leaving for Europe at the end of Son of a Smaller Hero, then, in this sense, Noah's later life would

have been restricted by some of the same confining meanings he sought to escape. For, like the "self-contained world" of the ghetto, Jake's "little" world is "inflated with love but ultimately self-serving and cocooned by money" (p. 89), and his intellectual world is "In a word...self-regarding" (p. 302). Now, movement beyond the restrictiveness suggested by the novel's prison imagery flourishes only in the phantom movement of the Horseman as he rides across the expanse of Jake's imagination.

While there are parallels between Jake in his youth and André and Noah, there are closer and more pervasive resemblances between him and Norman Price. Not only does he share in Norman Price's rootlessness in glum, grey London, but also, almost exactly the same age, he shares in his weariness, his inability to act decisively, his woe over his lack of greatness, and his feeling that the best part of his life is behind him. Interestingly, therefore, although St. Urbain's Horseman, filled with Jake's thoughts and memories, is more deeply steeped in subjectivity than any of the novels since The Acrobats, and although it is clear that Jake is tormented, much of his torment, like the torment in A Choice of Enemies, is rendered prosaic: "now the further prospect of others torn by his own concerns, more malcontent and swollen egos, filled him with ennui" (p. 302). Like the Canadians in A Choice of

Enemies, Jake has come to England in order to conquer it, in order to achieve a greatness which Canada cannot offer. Like them, he fails. Considering this, and considering the theme of A Choice of Enemies, it is fitting that Jake comes to understand that he has "foolishly held Canada culpable for all his discontents" just "As his father had blamed the goyim for his own inadequacies" (p. 302).

The shuffled scenes of the first three novels project the performance of particular lives within the tumbling pattern of the human condition, and project how man is at once the same as, and different from, those around him. And in Duddy Kravitz, the particular focus on Duddy himself, projects the performance of a particular life within this pattern. In St. Urbain's Horseman, the scenes shift as Jake's mind skips from one phase of his life to another, and as the focus shifts from Jake, to his wife, to his mother, and to Harry Stein. These shifting scenes contribute to a full picture of Jake's life, as the reader learns how others give it context, and as it becomes clear that the trial is both the culmination and result of all that has happened to him. That Jake is both similar to, and different from, those around him is reflected in the similarities between himself and Harry Stein, with whom he is constantly compared; and these similarities are intimated by the proximity between his last name—



Hersh, and Harry's Jewish name—Hershel. Thus, in a most Harry Stein-like manner, Jake directs "a spray of murdering lime solution through the fence at Old Lady Dry Cunt's rhododendron bed" (p. 17); and as Jake creates the Horseman in his own image (p. 464), and as he imagines the Horseman doing what he himself can only dream of doing, so Harry tells him, "I've got the courage to do things you only dream of" (p. 374).

Richler's characters make, and are made by, their worlds. Consequently, they embody what is universal in their worlds, and these universals become concretized in plot. Harry is what his deprived and brutal upbringing has done to him. Having, and having had, next to nothing, and seeing so very much around him, he wants what he can never get. Unable to control this obsessive and insatiable wanting, and unable to control the rage which not getting kindles, he is the terrifying human extension of those caricatures in Atuk whose humanity is so sapped that they are unable to make choices. And Harry is the personification of "the vandals...the concentration camp survivors. The emaciated... The starvelings" (p. 89) of whom Jake is so frightened. The relationship between Jake and Harry, therefore, particularizes the disparity between those who have and those who do not have, since Jake is implicated in this disparity insofar as his great material well-being

has its source in a frivolity which pays enormous amounts to titillate itself rather than helping those who do not have.<sup>6</sup> Thus, "while 450 million people were starving and, in England...18 per cent...lived below subsistence level... I, Jacob Hersh...paid £ 15,000 not to direct a fun film... survived very nicely" (p. 89-90). And thus aware, Jake expects "the coming of...the injustice collectors" (p. 89); and so they come in the form of Harry Stein; and so Jake's trial implicitly is the occasion for them to make their case against him, "to ask him...for an accounting" (p. 89).

The appearance of Duddy Kravitz in St. Urbain's Horseman is the most obvious example of how Richler has, in a sense, rewritten his previous novels. Now middle-ageish and "successful," Duddy is characterized by the same duality which characterized him in his own novel, the duality between his spontaneity and loyalty to those for whom he cares, and his crassness and destructive ruthlessness. Interestingly, just as Warren Tallman suggests that Richler has written himself into a corner with Duddy Kravitz, that "If he is to advance beyond the boundaries into which he has guided his protagonist he will need to discover a new way of seeing which will make life...a mirror and a source for deeper desires than his present hero even dreams,"<sup>7</sup> so Jake's deeper desires, his moral concern, allow him a way of seeing that Duddy could not

begin to understand.

The dislocation of the reader's feelings in Duddy Kravitz also occurs in St. Urbain's Horseman in order that the reader experience Jake's confusions. The novel begins close to where it will end, and the reader's confusion, which stems from his ignorance of what has gone before, is exacerbated by the wanderings of Jake's mind. And as if the Horseman is not ambiguous enough himself, there seems to be a confusing disproportion between the prominence which the title, as a statement of what the novel is about, implies for the Horseman, and Jake's own clear predominance, a disproportion which perhaps suggests that Jake himself is the Horseman as much as, if not more than, Joey is. Nevertheless, details, like those in Atuk and Cocksure, become meaningful as the novel progresses. That the reader learns of the complete circumstances of trial only after Jake's life has been reconstructed expresses structurally how the trial is the culmination and result of Jake's past.

It is crucial to understand that Richler internalizes in Jake much of what he criticizes in Atuk and Cocksure. While this means that Jake is a flawed character, it allows Richler to deal "realistically" with what he criticizes, which in turn means that, as Jake does find meaning and value in the world,

the world as it is, and as bad as it is, has meaning and value to offer. Although the ridiculing of Canadian mediocrity in Atuk has a parallel in the satiric treatment of Doug Fraser, "one of Canada's most uncompromising and prolific problem playwrights" (p. 148), Jake, at first eager to escape this mediocrity, afraid of being defined by it, feels "increasingly claimed" by Canada, the more he realizes his own clear lack of greatness, his own mediocrity. More, while Richler, detached, excoriates the trivia-laden society of Atuk, Jake feels that triviality is one of his and his generation's defining characteristics: "Jake feared, they would be dismissed as trivial, a peripheral generation" (p. 309). Indeed, this feeling of triviality is one of his obsessions, for to the extent that life is trivial—not meaningful, it is meaningless; and this feeling of meaninglessness is part of what drives him to share vicariously in the greatness which he assigns to the Horseman. As a "film fantasy spinner," Jake has some of the Star Maker in him, a major and obvious difference being that the Star Maker's fantasies overwhelm reality, while Jake uncomfortably realizes that reality is larger than any fantasy he will ever produce. In contrast to Mortimer, a relative innocent who is oppressed and destroyed by the fantastic malevolence of his world, Jake has a greater hand in the immoralities of his world and suffers less in the face of them. As he fears

the "injustice-collectors" more than he feels for them, as he is bothered by the unoriginality of his "ennui," so an irritating self-indulgence and gratuitousness characterizes it: he is spiritually incapable of great suffering.

St. Urbain's Horseman contains elements of comedy, satire, the grotesque and black humor. While they reflect particular ways of seeing the world, and while they tend to distort reality in order to represent it, all of these ways of seeing become part of the novel's view of the world, and the distortions blend in with, rather than obtrude upon, the novel's representation of the world as it is. The baseball game at Hamstead Heath is comparable to the Bar Mitzvah film in Duddy Kravitz. Described as a "ritual," it is a celebration of much of the same emptiness which the Bar Mitzvah film celebrates, as it pays homage to Gods who "grow infirm...like Paul Hornung...or...Sandy Koufax" (p. 309), and as it is punctuated with emasculation, adulterousness and violence. Herky's comic-satiric grand tour of the toilets of Europe reduces Europe to what its high-culture pretends does not exist. Aberrance and grotesqueries are rife in the novel, as the scatology, the diseased and the maimed, and the violence express in their totality Jake's realization that "The times were depraved," and that "society's golden rule was alcoholism, drug addiction,

and inchoate brutality" (p. 89). The black humor expresses the extent to which immorality has established itself as a norm:

Cairo claimed forty-four planes shot down.  
There was dancing in the streets. The  
headline in the first edition of the Even-  
ing Standard announced that Germany was to  
send Israel twenty thousand gas masks.  
"Nowadays," Jake hollered at the others,  
"everybody is a black humorist."  
(pp. 384-385)

Yet, while black humor resounds throughout Cocksure, as an immoral norm completely dominates it, in St. Urbain's Horseman, this humor is set against a melancholy which issues from the pervasive brooding and crying, which themselves reveal a sympathy and a sensitivity which black humor inverts. Thus, while black humor posits laughter as the only response to the incongruities of the world, all Jake can do after he learns of the Horseman's death is weep.

The contradictions which plague Jake and, indeed, are part of him, are magnified in the figure of the Horseman, who is, as much as he is anything, the projection of what Jake dreams for himself. Jake will never know if the Horseman meant to blackmail or murder Mengele for revenge; and the Horseman's flashing will to revenge is inextricably part of the violence which it breeds, and which defines the impossibility of revenge as a moral act. Indeed, as Harry, like the Horseman,

has the courage to do what Jake dreams of, and as he thrives on the destructiveness of his acts of revenge, so their meanness and vindictiveness appear to qualify the apparent glory of the Horseman's revenge. The connection between St. Urbain's Horseman and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is especially to the point here. As the Horseman, in Jake's mind, charges about on a white stallion, he almost seems to be the first of the Four Horsemen, the incarnation of war released by God to overthrow the forces of evil; and the violence and destruction that follow him wherever he goes make him like the second of the Horsemen who sets into action those inner energies by whose means evil men become their own worst enemies. But the point is, of course, that in St. Urbain's Horseman, God does not exist, and that, therefore, the Horseman, as he exists in Jake's mind, is the instrument of man rather than of God. And, therefore, just as man, without God, has no absolute source of values and is lost in a moral wilderness, so moral ambiguity is of the Horseman's essence, and so he seems no better than his enemies. Although the phantom movement of the Horseman contrasts with those imprisoned by what defines them, its meaningfulness is as insubstantial as it is fleet, and the implication is that some measure of definition is necessary for meaningfulness. Like Duddy, the Horseman runs away as much as he runs towards.

Confusion is also inherent in Jake's liberalism, which, despite its clear weaknesses, and despite the extent to which Richler has criticized liberalism in his previous novels, is the ethical stance of the novel. As Alexânder Meiklejohn eloquently puts it:

liberalism...indicates a pattern of culture which criticizes itself... It has customs and standards of behaviour. But it also has...the attitude of...questioning its own dominant beliefs and standards... The liberal both believes and doubts...and... if an individual or a group will hold fast both to custom and intelligence, then its experience will inevitably be paradoxical and divided against itself. The being who seeks intelligence is a divided personality.<sup>8</sup>

Denied the easiness of an absolute position, Jake's dividedness manifests itself as he tries to strike a balance—which will allow for "decency, tolerance, honor"—between the extremes he feels squeezing him and finds intolerable.

Greatness itself is a source of meaning and value. For if Jake feels his life to be trivial, he understand that it is trivial in relation to those, like Dr. Johnson, who are great, and that their greatness is a measure of human possibility:

"All right, then, what do you believe in?' 'Praising those who where truly great, those who came nearest the sun'" (p. 304). The success of Jake's marriage is a further source of meaning and value, for, as he tells his mother, "I love her. And so long as she loves me, I cannot be entirely bad" (p. 47). The



first successful marriage in Richler's fiction, it stands in contrast to the confusion, enmity, grotesquerie and violence in the novel's world. While Jake, at the very beginning of the novel, leaves his bed unable to sleep, it is a measure of what he finds for himself that, at the very end of the novel, "he returned to bed, and fell into a deep sleep, holding Nancy to him" (p. 467).

For all this it would be a mistake to see Richler's summing up as clearly affirmative, and it would be a mistake to argue that the novel is comic because it ends happily, and because the successful marriage symbolizes comic social reintegration. Ironies qualify what might seem completely affirmative as the disparities persist unameliorated. Though Jake weeps for it, Harry is still made to bear the guilt for what his upbringing has done to him; and in severely sentencing him, society sanctimoniously and unjustly uses him to define by contrast what it believes to be its own propriety. And though Jake has the success of his marriage, he realizes, like Ginger Coffey, that his and his wife's best years are past, and that he must resign himself to the fact of his mortality. As he returns to bed, and falls deeply asleep holding his wife to him, he is, as much as anything, drawing his insular, little world, "inflated with love but ultimately self-serving," more tightly around him, and "tenderness in one house" is still no less "possible, without

corruption, than socialism in a single country" (p. 89). Finally, the Horseman's "presumed" death intensifies rather than lessens Jake's obsession with him, for now, in his nightmares, Jake himself has become the Horseman.

Sheps suggests that there are two kinds of time in Richler's novels, each suitable to a particular view of the world: "bourgeois time" is the time of a world "in which a person advances from A to B, and B is qualitatively different from A," and reflects how "social mobility and the idea of self-development are both possible;" and "static" fictional time exists when "we are no longer in the world of progressive and incremental mobility...as the characters do not grow and change."<sup>9</sup> St. Urbain's Horseman projects both kinds of time, and the latter, manifesting in the persisting disparities, in Harry Stein's personal and literal imprisonment, is the large context for the former, which exists insofar as Jake finds meaning and value. And what he finds, therefore, is like one of Auden's "ironic points of light." The point of light is ironic because it is precisely the prevailing darkness which sets it off, indeed gives meaning to it; and it is precisely the darkness of the novel's world which gives meaning to the light which shines for Jake a little.

It might seem that in St. Urbain's Horseman Richler comes

full circle back to the verisimilitude of his first novels. And as the circle images the past repeating itself in the present, it might seem to image the novel's reiteration of what has gone before. Every serious and self-conscious writer's development, however, should be dialectical rather than circular, an evolving synthesis between what has gone before and new insights, rather than a mere repeating. The tension at the heart of St. Urbain's Horseman proves it to be this kind of a synthesis. For its world-view posits against each other the destructiveness and inhumanity present in Richler's fiction from The Acrobats on, and meaning and value which, rather than having roots in any previous affirmation, signal a partial coming to terms with what previously precluded its possibility. This impossibility reached its height in Cocksure by virtue of the black humor there. While the return to verisimilitude in St. Urbain's Horseman is a way out of Cocksure's black and constricting fantasy, and is essential to Richler's assertion of human possibility, the dark ironies qualifying this assertion attest to the dialectical incorporation of the impossibility which Cocksure depicts. And so, in contrast to Saul Bellow's Mr. Sammler, who knows and who can keep the terms of his human contract, the terms which all men, in their inmost heart, know, and who is a very champion of man's common humanity, Jake Herish also knows, and

knows further that he cannot keep the terms very well. This is the essence of the tension which is the synthesis of Richler's past black pessimism and partial resolve, the tension which is similarly present in, say, Brian Moore's The Luck of Ginger Coffey and Bernard Malamud's A New Life: that life, as good as love can make it, and as much as it can understand what greatness is, is hemmed in by nearly overwhelming limitations and disparities, and can never be anything else but what these limitations and disparities restrict it to.

Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Fulford, "All the Mordecais, Together at Last," Saturday Night (June, 1971), p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Sheps, p. ix.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, George Woodcock, "From the Ghetto to Exile, Richler Bridges the Gulf," Victoria Daily Times (June 12, 1971), p. 16. David Pryce-Jones, "A Stuntman with the Language," Life (July 9, 1971), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> For more comment on this see Bowering, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Mordecai Richler, St. Urbain's Horseman (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), p. 13. All quotations are from this text.

<sup>6</sup> See also Robert Heibroner, The Great Ascent (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 146.

<sup>7</sup> Warren Tallman, "Richler and the Faithless City," Canadian Literature (Winter, 1960), p. 64.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Meiklejohn, Education Between Two Worlds. (New York: Atherton, 1967), pp. 112-114.

<sup>9</sup> Sheps, pp. xiii-xiv.

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