Short title: "Reality and Fantasy in the Novels of Mordecai Richler" - M. Darling

REALITY AND FANTASY IN THE NOVELS OF MORDECAI RICHLER

by

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ABSTRACT

As a novelist primarily concerned with morality and the survival of the individual in a hostile world, Mordecai Richler repeatedly demonstrates the tension between the fantasies of his characters and the actualities that confront them. For the purposes of this study, fantasy is taken to represent the thought processes that produce daydreams, irrational fears, and wish-fulfillment, while reality is the actual world of the novel against which the characters pit themselves in their struggle for self-knowledge or success. The characters who are successful in Richler's terms are those who are not so trapped in their fantasy worlds that they cannot transcend their limitations and the restrictions of their society to affirm the values of human decency, moral integrity, and perseverance.

RESUME

Comme romancier qui se préoccupe surtout de la moralité et de la survivance de l'individu dans un monde hostile, Mordecai Richler montre à plusieurs reprises la tension entre les fantaisies de ses personnages et les actualités qui les affrontent. Pour les objets de cette étude, la fantaisie représente les procès mentals qui produisent les rêveries, les peurs irraisonnables, et l'accomplissement des désirs, tandis que la réalité est le monde actuel du roman contre lequel les personnages se luttent pour la connaissance ou le succès. Les personnages qui réussissent d'après Richler sont ceux qui ne sont pas si attrapés par leurs mondes de fantaisies qu'ils ne peuvent pas dépasser leurs limitations et les restrictions de leur société pour affirmer les valeurs de la bienséance humaine, l'intégrité morale, et la persévérance.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

A number of Richler's critics have drawn attention to the development of his fiction as a progression "from a rather melodramatic realism towards satirical fantasy and farce."[1] In this view, The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz is seen as his key work, in its successful fusion of the elements of the realistic and the fantastic. The same critics have focused on the use of fantasy as an exclusively satiric device. But if it is true that the action of Cocksure and The Incomparable Atuk is set against "a background of total fantasy as the satirist's appropriate framework,"[2] it is equally evident that another use of fantasy is made in dealing with the inner lives of the characters, especially noteworthy in St. Urbain's Horseman, a novel that Richler has asserted is

[1] David Myers, "Mordecai Richler as Satirist," Ariel 4, No.1 (January 1973), p.47. See also George Woodcock, Mordecai Richler (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1971) and G. David Sheps, Introduction to Mordecai Richler (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1971), pp.ix-xxvi.

[2] Woodcock, p.46. In this respect, Woodcock follows the lead of Northrop Frye, in Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p.224, who maintains that "Satire demands at least a token fantasy, a content which the reader recognizes as grotesque, and at least an implicit moral standard, the latter being essential in a militant attitude to experience." See also Matthew Hodgart, Satire (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), pp.10-14.

not satirical in intent.[3]

George Woodcock has noted that "Richler is less successful as a writer of satirical fantasy than he is as a novelist in the old sense as a chronicler of human conflict."[4] Woodcock, perhaps the most perceptive of Richler's critics, sees him as a novelist in the tradition of Balzac, "highly conscious . . . of the interplay between an individual's will and the social and historical imperatives that bear upon him."[5] It is this tension, between the inner and outer world, the expectation and the result, that this study seeks to explore. It will be necessary at once then to clarify my use of the terms "fantasy" and "reality".

In the usual literary sense of the word, "fantasy includes, in the action, the characters, or the setting, things that are impossible under ordinary conditions or in the normal course of human events."[6] I shall limit my use

[3] See Donald Cameron, Conversations with Canadian Novelists (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), Part II, pp.119, 121. Cf. Warren Tallman, "Need for Laughter," Canadian Literature, No.56 (Spring 1973), pp.71-83, who compares Richler to Swift in many of the attitudes expressed in the book.

[4] Woodcock, "The Wheel of Exile," Tamarack Review, No.58 (Winter 1971), p.68. It will be noted that Woodcock has modified his approach to Richler in the light of St. Urbain's Horseman.

[5] Ibid., p.68.

[6] Ernest Bernbaum, "Fantasy," Dictionary of World Literary Terms, ed. Joseph T. Shipley, rev. ed. (Boston: The Writer, 1970), p.117.

of the word, however, to its psychological action in the thought processes of the literary characters I discuss. My definition is that of Arthur Clayborough in The Grotesque in English Literature: "Dream or fantasy thinking is the activity which characterizes the regressive aspect of mind, expressing itself in wilful distortion, 'wishful thinking', and a rejection of the 'natural conditions of organisation' of the external world,"[7] a definition which covers satisfactorily the range of fantasy in Richler's characters. Duddy Kravitz's dream of possessing land, Mortimer Griffin's fear of impotence, and Jake Hersh's Horseman are all examples of what I mean by fantasy.

A different set of problems arises in connection with the use of the word "reality" in literary criticism. In recent years, it has become increasingly difficult to speak of "reality" and "realism" as critical terms. A recent symposium on "Realism, Reality and the Novel" could only conclude that "as certainty about any objective reality no longer seems possible and as distinctions between inner and outer realities have broken down, there is much in life--especially in public life--that cannot be represented satisfactorily in fiction any more."[8] A relatively simple

[7] Arthur Clayborough, The Grotesque in English Literature (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p.76. Clayborough follows Jung in his terminology.

[8] Park Honan, "Realism, Reality and the Novel: A Symposium," Novel: A Forum on Fiction 2 (Spring 1969), p.200.

definition of literary realism as the "willed tendency of art to approximate reality,"[9] is unacceptable if at the same time we assert that "Reality in the artist's sense is always something created; it does not exist a priori."[10] Thus, Ian Watt's formal realist approach to the novel as "a full and authentic report of human experience,"[11] leaves no room for the works of Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth, John Hawkes or Iris Murdoch, to name a few of the modern novelists whom Robert Scholes has termed "fabulators".[12] Maintaining that the cinema has usurped from literature the attempt to represent reality, Scholes praises the writing that "tends away from the representation of reality but returns toward actual human life by way of ethically controlled fantasy."[13]

Scholes's statement is appropriate to this discussion insofar as it parallels the critical view of Richler's work presented above, that he is primarily a satirist in

[9] Harry Levin, The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Realists (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.3.

[10] A.A. Mendilow, Time and the Novel (London: Peter Nevill, 1952), p.36.

[11] Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), p.32.

[12] See Robert Scholes, The Fabulators (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

[13] Ibid., p.11.

the Swiftian vein. But this study seeks to show Richler as a moralist, concerned with the inner lives of his characters, and the ways in which they react to their environment. Thus, if we maintain with U.C. Knoepflmacher that the novel "is a 'fiction,' not a chronicle, and as such offers a dimension of experience different from an objective recording of fact,"[14] then it can be seen that the "reality" of the novel is simply the pattern imposed by the novelist on the world of his creation. In this case, the world of The Acrobats, written in a "dominant narrative mode of realistic characterization, verisimilitude of action and psychological plausibility,"[15] is no more "real" than the world of Cocksure, in "a dominant mode of conscious caricature in characterization, purposeful implausibility of action and fantasy in events."[16] It is the painful reality of their world that conflicts with the fantasies of Richler's characters, and it is this conflict that I intend to explore in terms of the irrevocable opposition of fantasy and reality.

[14] U.C. Knoepflmacher, Laughter and Despair: Readings in Ten Novels of the Victorian Era (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p.5.

[15] Sheps, p.ix.

[16] Ibid., p.ix.

Chapter I

The Early Novels: The Acrobats

Mordecai Richler has stated that "any serious writer is a moralist,"[1] and the greater part of his own work explores the breakdown of moral values in the post-war world, and the problems of a generation without commitments. In a 1957 interview with Nathan Cohen, Richler explained his outlook:

> I think what is emerging from this breakdown is a much more complicated and closely held personal standard of values. Even in small things. I think we are coming back to a very personal and basic set of values because the exterior values have failed. There has been a collapse of absolute values, whether that value was God or Marx or gold. We are living at a time when superficially life seems meaningless, and we have to make value judgements all the time, it seems in relation to nothing. Do you understand what I am saying? This seems to me the big problem.[2]

Richler's solution to the problem lies in a search for "the values with which a man can live with honour."[3] From this stance, he presents a series of heroes who seek to define

[1] Mordecai Richler, Shovelling Trouble (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972), p.20.

[2] Richler in Nathan Cohen, "A Conversation with Mordecai Richler," Tamarack Review, No.2 (Winter 1957), p.19.

[3] Ibid., p.20.

themselves through the choices they are forced to make. Of these, only the last, Jake Hersh of St. Urbain's Horseman, emerges triumphant from his ordeal, having preserved his sense of honour in a world of absurdity. The heroes of the early novels fail because they do not have the will to make the necessary choices. Their stories are of failed rebellion, because they are not even sure what they are against. Nathan Cohen has pointed out the essential irony that "the charges the heroes of the Richler view make against their antagonists apply, with equal validity, to themselves."[4] If this is a fault in Richler's writing, it is one he shares with Jean-Paul Sartre, who is, in more than one sense, Richler's literary master.[5] Existentialism involves the making of choices, and this is one thing, as I pointed out, that Richler's protagonists generally shy away from. Yet, as Sartre points out, "I can always choose, but I ought to know that if I do not choose, I am still choosing."[6] Thus, Norman Price at least salvages some sense of existential self-definition, because unlike André Bennett, he confronts the reality of his situation

[4] Cohen, "Heroes of the Richler View," Tamarack Review, No.6 (Winter 1958), p.59.

[5] For a discussion of Richler's literary influences, see Peter Dale Scott, "A Choice of Certainties," Tamarack Review, No.8 (Summer 1958), pp.73-82, and George Woodcock, Mordecai Richler, pp.28-29.

[6] Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), p.48.

and decides to go on living, acknowledging his fantasies as insubstantial qualities by which to live. Noah Adler nearly falls prey to André's weakness, but recovers in time to make his escape from the ghetto. As he says to his friend Mr. Panofsky, "'If you choose not to choose then there is no truth at all. There are only points of view. . . .'"[7] Still, his escape can easily be seen as an ironic triumph, for the fate of another expatriate, André Bennett, surely hangs over his head. He can only rationalize his escape through the vision of Europe as somehow morally and culturally superior to Canada, a view that is quickly seen to be fantasy in the light of The Acrobats.

Set against the tempestuous background of festival time in the Spanish town of Valencia, The Acrobats reveals the emptiness of life in post-war Europe, emphasizing as well the sordid lives of North Americans who have come to Spain to find some meaning to their existence. Like the enormous papier maché fallas that are blown up on the final day of the festival, Richler's hollow characters, as George Woodcock has pointed out, are also doomed to fall.[8] Unfortunately, this metaphor is carried too far in the hands of an inexperienced novelist, and instead of sympathetic human

[7] Richler, Son of a Smaller Hero (London: André Deutsch, 1954), p.99.

[8] Woodcock, Mordecai Richler, pp.13-14.

beings, Richler too frequently creates caricatures.

André Bennett, a young Canadian painter from a wealthy Westmount family, has come to Spain in search of meaning, to find himself. Here he meets Barney Larkin, a middle-aged Jewish businessman, and his Gentile wife Jessie, who seeks the mental and physical excitement foreign to their marriage. An ex-Nazi named Roger Kraus, dominated by his fanatical sister, competes with André for the favours of Toni, a young prostitute. Jessie's homosexual brother Derek, hardened by the outcome of the Spanish Civil War, drinks heavily and berates everyone with cynical judgments of the world. The town itself seems to be inhabited exclusively by whores, pimps, ragged children, beggars, and sweating American tourists. The buildings are painted in faded, sickly colours, and the atmosphere of dingy bar-room odours and sour cigarette smoke sets the emotional tone of the novel:

> Ragged guitarists serenaded the tourists and leered for the occasional snapshot, cunning children of the poor played an earnest game of tag in and out amongst the crowd, lifting wallets on their way, sluts bargained here and there with fading gallants, and the aloof bourgeois in their mean black suits, sweating, unimpressed, just a bit too conscious of the stink of other bodies, idled about glumly, their pious wives dangling like dumplings from their sides.[9]

[9] Richler, The Acrobats (London: André Deutsch, 1954), p.9. Subsequent parenthetical references in this chapter will be to this edition.

Richler, also, is a bit too conscious of the stink of the bourgeois, and somehow the world he creates seems much too artificial, a despairingly romantic view of the post-Hemingway universe, "without even the desperate gaiety of the Jake Barnes crowd."[10] His best writing is a description of the painful, throbbing energy of the dance, in which all the pent-up demonic forces are loosed, and the sweating of the dancers seems a natural, human act, rather than a symbol of the guilt-ridden insecurity of the American tourists.

At the same time, the dance acts as a ritual fantasy, a purging of reality so that when the dance concludes, the gloomy day is seen to be uncommonly beautiful:

> . . . they danced until they were too drunk to stand (and they believed the sun was hot and the earth was friendly and the grass was green in spring), they danced until Sunday's dawn filled the sky gloomily and without promise (and they believed in the day and God and they were no longer afraid). (44)

Participation in the dance effectively separates the two races for there can be no release from tension for the North American characters in the book; they are too uncomfortably aware of their sordid surroundings.

André Bennett, the hero of the novel, tries repeatedly to escape from reality and from the necessity of choosing

[10] George Bowering, "And the Sun Goes Down," Canadian Literature, No.29 (Summer 1966), p.9.

a course of existence. He is first seen sitting on a bar stool, his ascetic pose suggesting a decadent Buddha. "His brown and brooding eyes stared ahead vacantly, probing for something apart, inwards, as if they had temporarily rejected reality " (11). André's spiritual potential is emphasized by his mentor Chaim: "'It is that he knows and understands all the things that he is against but he still doesn't know what he is for. André has the temperament of a priest but none of the present churches will do'" (36). Having withdrawn from active participation in the world around him, André is perhaps more a monk than a priest.

Retreating to the privacy of his room, André conjures up a fantasy world in which he assumes an Odysseus-like role, the romantic adventurer in foreign lands, a vision quickly vanquished by a glance around his room, littered with greasy rags and garbage. His bed is surrounded by rat-traps, bottles, books and suitcases, protection against the rats that he fears may attack him. There are no rats, of course; they are merely part of André's persecution complex, his fear of the ravenous world outside. These fears are the result of guilt feelings over the abortion death of his Jewish girlfriend Ida. The memory of her parents' accusations assumes nightmare proportions, and coupled with resentment towards his father and the bourgeois upbringing he has enjoyed, produces an overpowering feeling of vulnerability in André, a feeling that his own generation has been trapped

into a false commitment to a world they did not help to create:

> Often it appeared to André that he belonged to the last generation of men. A generation not lost and not unfound but sought after zealously, sought after so that it might stand up and be counted, perjuring itself and humanity, sought after by the propagandists of a faltering revolution and the rear-guard of a dying civilisation. His intellectual leaders had proven either duds or counterfeits--standing up in the thirties to cheer the revolution hoarsely, and in the fifties sitting down again to write a shy, tinny, blushing yes to capitalistic democracy. (32)

The theme of generational decay is an important one in Richler's fiction, always pointing to the inability of the generation born in the 1930's to live by the ideals and dreams of their immediate predecessors, dreams which are in any case shown to be fantasies, inadequate to deal with the harshness of post-war life.

In response to a world seemingly devoid of traditional values, Richler offers a plea for humanitarianism--a sense of respect for the individual man. This point of view is frequently expressed by André, who nevertheless lacks the courage of his convictions:

> 'Christ, there's nothing unusual about being a bourgeois or a worker. It is the man who is unusual--the man who rises above the restrictions of his own class to assert himself as an individual and

> humanitarian. It's pretty damn elementary to be aware of social injustice and poetic truth and beauty but to be capable of empathy, to understand the failings of a man--any man--even as you condemn him, well . . . Look, every human being is to be approached with a sense of wonder. The rest is crap, or incidental.' (73)

The point is made in conversation with Guillermo, a revolutionary socialist who despises André's bourgeois morality and aesthetic sensitivity. Ironically, it is Guillermo who insists that André's body be treated with respect, and vows revenge on his murderer, only to be arrested for his revolutionary activities before he can carry out his plan. Nevertheless, Guillermo is the prototype of the flawed ideal that so many of Richler's characters desire to emulate--the man of action and decision. Beside him, André's pious platitudes are exploded like the giant fallas, a point made explicit by Richler in the appearance of a "gaudy cardboard fantasy" (72) outside André's window as he attempts to explain his failure to act. Like the caricature of the bullfighter, André's romantic self-image is destined for destruction.

The haunting falla returns to mock him in the Larkins' hotel room: "'You are without hope or reason or direction'" (89). Unable to take advantage of Jessie's advances, he makes an embarrassed retreat when her husband enters. Again, the scene emphasizes André's indifference, a malaise which extends to his relationship with Toni, the Spanish prostitute who

loves him, knowing that her love will not be returned. Having had enough of killing and destruction, Toni wants "only the clean things" (48), the security that André has abandoned in his search for meaning. At the same time, André has lost the ability to communicate, to express any of the love he professes for mankind.

Nor does there seem to be any satisfying human relationship between any of the other characters in the novel. They are all equally victims of their own neurotic fantasies, none more so than Barney Larkin, who is portrayed with some measure of sympathy. He is not one of those characters whom Nathan Cohen claims to be "so small, so worthless, so obviously . . . undeserving of compassion, that they are not worth caring about."[11] Unlike André Bennett, Barney cannot help but be what he is: a middle-aged bourgeois intimidated by intellectuals and crooks alike, a man without tangible defenses against the world. He is incapable of pleasing his wife Jessie, either sexually or intellectually, and retreats into self-pity and resentment of his imagined tormentors. His bourgeois guilt complex forms the butt of Richler's first attempts at satire, and his Jewish self-consciousness prefigures the Jacob Shalinskys and Wolf Adlers of subsequent novels. The sight of his wife in André's arms kindles the feeling of persecution that he

[11] Cohen, "Heroes of the Richler View," p.56.

bears: "For us Jews, only sadness" (93). Driven to assert his manhood, Barney receives a blow to his imagination in a sordid escapade in a Spanish brothel. The temptation of the girls, who are obviously forbidden fruit to Barney, is effectively undercut by the reality of their slovenly appearance, and evident boredom with their work.

Barney's confession to Derek reveals his awareness that life's dreams are not fulfilled; that, in fact, movie stars are really whores, marriage is not fun and games, and communists eventually become clothing manufacturers. The failure of his own marriage serves to emphasize the impossibility of realizing one's dreams. Jessie was a status symbol to him, their marriage a step on his ladder to success. Now her maiden name--Miss Jessica Raymond of the Jacksonville Raymonds--returns to haunt him with the recognition of his own inferiority.

His pathetic attempts to better his situation are further exemplified in the changing of his name from Lazarus to Larkin, for which he is repeatedly ridiculed by his wife and brother-in-law. As George Bowering points out, the absence of Lazarus assures that no spiritual resurrection will take place,[12] and the introduction of Larkin points to the frivolity of Barney's life. Yet he is not without virtues, remaining devoted to his wife and children, and proud of the

[12] Bowering, p.7.

accomplishments of his race. He deserves better at the hands of Jessie and Derek.

It is ironic that Barney's confession should be made to his cynical brother-in-law Derek who has long ago turned to drink as a buttress against reality. He is all too painfully aware of the falsity of a romantic view of the world, as seen in his sarcastic recitation of a typical Hollywood movie plot. At one time an idealist, Derek has been hardened by the experiences of the war:

> One afternoon, an afternoon when the air-raids were still a joke, he had held hands with Eric in the cinema, watching Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in Gay Divorce. That night they had returned to the front by street car. At six a.m. Eric's leg had been shot off, and Derek had watched as he scrambled after it and threw it away. (130)

A representative of that generation condemned by André for its betrayal of socialist ideals, Derek is now content to play the role of a prophet of doom:

> 'The democracy of the philistines is reaching its logical conclusion. A kind of sugar-coated fascism doled out by mediocrity. But the tyranny of the proletariat will exceed the boorishness of the petty-bourgeois. The hunger is older, there are more accounts to be settled. I'll tell you what, D.J. Enjoy yourself madly, because pretty soon the hillbillies are going to storm the Winter Palace. Afterwards, darkness.' (130)

Derek's homosexual assignation with Juanito is equally indicative of moral degeneration in the post-war world.

Even sexuality is devoid of energy, as shown by Jessie's vain attempts to seduce André, and the prostitute Lolita's photograph album that preserves the memories of men she imagines as lovers. Jessie, like Lolita, has spent her life "accumulating memories," and only the saving grace of her fantasies keeps her from going down. In every crisis, Jessie's father has appeared in a dream to guide her, but on the brink of marital breakdown, the vision deserts her, and she is helpless in the face of reality.

A similar neurotic dependence exists between Roger Kraus and his sister Theresa. He is unable to act without her encouragement, while she only lives vicariously from his actions. As a rival for Toni's affection, Kraus is not unlike André in many ways. His hatred for the Jews is combined with a good measure of guilt, similar to what André feels at the memory of his encounter with Ida's parents. Also, Kraus's slaying of André recalls not only the younger man's irrational violence at their first encounter, but also the punch he directed at Ida's father. Each outburst is prompted by a guilt feeling increased by the presence of an imagined tormentor. Thus, Kraus not only hates André as a rival, but also sees in his friendship with Chaim a connection that makes André his accuser, the avenger of all the Jews that Kraus has murdered. "'What if the things I did were wrong,'" he says, "'what if the dead really weren't bad?'" (66). Confronted with his sister's

suicide, Kraus is forced to ask himself the same questions that have plagued André, and is left to ponder his fate.

Richler refrains from an overly pessimistic view of life by providing a coda in which two babies are born to take the places of the two characters who have died. Toni bears Kraus's child, and André's friends, Pepe and Maria, also produce a baby. Both children are called André, and under the spiritual guidance of Chaim, a new world appears for Toni and her baby. As Chaim insists, "'There is always hope'" (204).

As George Woodcock says, The Acrobats is a novel in which "fantasy appears in abundance,"[13] especially in the dreams and aspirations that can never be realized. In this first book, Richler outlines all of his subsequent themes, none more important than the necessity of choosing, of defining oneself for, rather than against something. Although André Bennett fails to do this, his struggle approaches tragic proportions in its enlightenment of a universal search for meaning.

[13] Woodcock, Mordecai Richler, p.19.

Chapter II

Son of a Smaller Hero

Son of a Smaller Hero takes up where The Acrobats leaves off. The epigraph of the novel, "If God did not exist, everything would be lawful," is a favourite quotation of Richler's, and suggests the same concern with moral values that underlies the earlier work. But Son of a Smaller Hero is a more obvious first novel, a bildungsroman in the tradition of Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. Before Noah Adler can make his escape from the ghetto, he must first free himself from the nets of religion, family and culture that threaten to ensnare him in his search for self-identity. Essentially all these things are merely the cement holding the prison wall together, and that prison wall was Richler's own--the Jewish ghetto of Montreal.

Richler has said that "To be a Jew and a Canadian is to emerge from the ghetto twice,"[1] and while the Canadian ghetto mentality might not be familiar to a foreigner, it is not necessary to be Jewish to understand the reasons for Noah's flight. George Woodcock maintains that "the

[1] Richler, Foreword to Hunting Tigers Under Glass (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1968), p.8.

themes of isolation and division . . . are also the themes from which it is difficult for any writer in Canada to escape."[2] The sense of Canadian isolation and inferiority has haunted Richler as much as his own Jewishness, and in this first Montreal-based novel, he sets the tone for much of his subsequent work.

Richler's descriptive passages ring truer in this book, as he is so obviously describing something he knows well. Yet there is more than a hint of self-consciousness in his prose when he tries to get at the essence of the environment:

> The ghetto of Montreal has no real walls and no true dimensions. The walls are the habit of atavism and the dimensions are an illusion. But the ghetto exists all the same. The fathers say: 'I work like this so it'll be better for the kids.' A few of the fathers, the dissenters, do not crowd their days with work. They drink instead. But in the end it amounts to the same thing: in the end, work, drink, or what have you, they are all trying to fill in the void.[3]

The void is the spiritual emptiness concomitant with an undue emphasis on monetary success, and it is this vacuum that Noah Adler seeks not to fill, but to avoid altogether. In doing so, Noah faces "the predicament of the man who sets

[2] Woodcock, Mordecai Richler, p.21.

[3] Richler, Son of a Smaller Hero (London: André Deutsch, 1955), p.14. Subsequent parenthetical references in this chapter will be to this edition.

out honestly to find and to be himself in a world where most men fear their own natures and try to live by comfortable falsehoods."[4]

As in The Acrobats, Richler's targets are the futile dreams and aspirations of men and women alienated from the real world. Noah's grandfather, Melech Adler, resents this younger generation for its disrespect and disregard for tradition, while his thoughts return to the Gentile girl he once loved back in Poland. Outwardly the most orthodox of Jews, Melech is still captive to his memory of the blonde girlfriend of his youth, a fantasy that he preserves in letters that are written and stowed away in a box. Noah's father Wolf depends on Melech for a living and imagines that money will bring him the happiness he lacks. Rationalizing his inability to cope with strangers as the inevitable hardship of the Jewish working man, Wolf retreats to the comfort of his hobbies, and the coded diary in which he records all the insignificant minutiae of his tedious existence.

The rest of Melech's older children rally around Max, an unscrupulous businessman whose success epitomizes the materialistic credo that Noah rejects. The younger children are equally corrupt, but without the initiative to support themselves. Ida spends her days lolling on her bed eating

[4] Woodcock, Mordecai Richler, p.21.

chocolates, and her nights in sordid sexual encounters on Mount Royal. "In her dreams there were many young men and she was no longer fat" (22). Shloime's ambition is "to own a blazer with the name KID LIGHTNING printed on the back of it" (23).

Noah's boyhood friends offer no comfort to him now. They are captivated by idealistic slogans and visions of the Promised Land in Israel. Noah realizes that they have only sacrificed their individuality to a collective fantasy, one that can have no personal significance for him. Noah must have tangible evidence of an individual freedom, "some knowledge of himself . . . independent of others" (203).

As the novel opens, Noah has already made his escape from his family, and is living in a rooming-house on Dorchester Street. But already he finds that his dream of a beautiful world of freedom is punctured by the same petty squabbles and human foibles that assailed him at home. Noah feels lost because he has always defined himself in opposition to his family; apart from them, he is helpless and in need of their suffocating presence:

> At home his indignation had nourished him. Being wretched, and in opposition, had organized his suffering. But that world, that world against which he had rebelled so vociferously, was no longer his. Seen from a distance, it seemed full of tender possibilities, anachronistic but beautiful. (31)

Like André Bennett, Noah recognizes that "It is necessary to say yes to something" (31), and yet he cannot find anything worthy of his commitment.

Without a sense of direction, Noah's search for self-definition involves the ruthless destruction of ideals and dreams that seem hollow or hypocritical to him. This destructive aspect, to be more fully developed in the character of Duddy Kravitz, is demonstrated here in a series of encounters in which Noah gains experience at the expense of others more vulnerable than he.

The first of Noah's victims is Theo Hall, an English professor at Wellington College who adopts Noah as one of his protégés. Like Barney Larkin of The Acrobats, Theo is intellectually and sexually impotent. All his great ambitions of bringing culture to the philistines have fallen short. The little magazine he starts makes no significant contribution to literature. His students prove to be less brilliant than he had expected. Frustration weighs him down:

> Susceptible to the exasperations of spirit which characterize most reformers, he tended to suffer vulgarity in smaller spirits as a personal affront. He was a social democrat. Encounters with almost any amusement designed for the crowd made him choke up and clench his fists. He did not find it easy to cope with society. (47)

Theo's neurotic compulsion to surround himself with disciples

brings about his downfall, for Noah's ruthlessness is attractive to Theo's long-suffering wife Miriam.

Miriam, too, is a victim in Noah's struggle, and "like André Bennett she is a casualty of the past and of her own incapacity to tame it."[5] Having been brought up in a fantasy world by her father, protected by her brother Paul and worshipped by the neighbours, Miriam possesses a distinctly distorted world view. Her need for security has brought her an unfulfilled marriage with Theo, held together only by a shared set of nostalgic fantasies about the group they were once part of, and whose experiences they shared vicariously. In leaving Theo for Noah, she tries to realize the dream of romantic love she has never enjoyed. But her own possessiveness destroys the relationship, as Noah feels his own freedom threatened, ironically at the point in the novel when family responsibilities make their strongest appeal to him. Miriam returns to Theo a confirmed nymphomaniac, while Noah gains valuable experience in the exposure of this sham relationship.

During a short stay with his mother's family, the Goldenbergs, Noah manages to shock their sensibilities by exposing the hypocrisy of the moral code by which they live. Tenuously held together by lies, the community's surface tension is broken by Noah's hints at its weaknesses:

[5] Woodcock, Mordecai Richler, p.22.

> He finally realized that the secret of their humanity was that each one had a tiny deviation all his and/or her own. None conformed completely. Marsha, the little bitch, had love being made to her by a McGill quarterback whilst she was trying to hook Noah. (That finally endeared her to him.) His Aunt Rachel obeyed in all things except that she secretly read the most blatantly pornographic literature, and Mrs Feldman beat her French poodle with a whip. Terror lurked behind their happiness. (204)

Noah rejects the temptation of middle-class conformity in which individuality implies aberration. "Each orthodoxy and each conformity survives only because its supporters have found the appropriate evasions that allow them to retain the illusion of individuality, but, while their evasions keep them human, they also make them culpable."[6]

The most effective unmasking of illusion is the central episode of Wolf Adler's death, in which the elemental fantasies of man are depicted against the seething background of the Montreal ghetto. It is Wolf's lust for money that leads him to a suicidal plunge into Melech's burning office, and ironically makes him a hero in the ghetto. But there is another twist to Richler's irony, in that money, not the Torah, is the actual object of worship in the society, so that in reality, the ghetto residents are deifying their own greed in their apotheosis of Wolf Adler.

[6] Woodcock, Mordecai Richler, p.25.

Wolf's death is a great deal more useful to his family than his life ever was, and the hypocrisy of the mourners is neatly expressed in the counterpoint of their thoughts to the speech of the rabbi at Wolf's funeral:

> I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.

MAX

> Me, I put my trust in Dow Jones. I don't go for all that hocus-pocus about God being such a big deal and being shipped downstairs--C.O.D., I'll bet--just for laying somebody else's goods on the q.t. Anyway, it's kind of nice for the family. Publicity for me, too. . . .
>
> . . . . . .

HARRY GOLDENBERG

> I'll obviously have to give her another shot after the funeral. That girl. First she fell for Father's fantastic delusions about his own sainthood--thank God the Jews have turned away from Chassidism--and now she must try to reconcile the Wolf she knew with the man who died for the Torah. She's a difficult woman, but Wolf was a fool. . . .
>
> . . . . . .

> He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honour him. With long life will I satisfy him, and shew him my salvation.

NOAH

> I am thankful, Daddy, that if you were here you would have had the good sense to have turned your back on it. Speeches, you would have said. Prayers. You would have walked away. But I can't. Ironic that you who suffered so much all your life for what people said should not be capable of hearing when they, the people, are at last saying fine things about you.

(168-70)

Only Noah sees the falsity of the whole affair, and it is he who confronts his closest relatives with questions about Wolf's death. Max agrees not to use Wolf's name in his political campaign, but Noah cannot broach the subject so directly to his mother and grandfather. Melech is aware of the lie, but cannot bring himself to acknowledge it in front of Noah, for that would imply a confession of his own guilt in connection with the letters in the box. Noah's mother is only too willing to cling to the fantasy of Wolf's heroism for it provides her with the social status and respect she has always longer for. The difference between Leah's desperate attempts to capitalize on her husband's fame and the innocent fantasies by which he lived is emphasized in another of Richler's finely orchestrated ironic scenes. As Noah's mother speaks to her friends of memorial ambulances and scholarships in Wolf's name, in the next room Noah pores over the contents of his father's diary, recording time wasted, average number of quarrels per day, volume of urine passed, and other aspects of the petty concerns that made up Wolf's existence. The exploitation of Wolf's supposed heroism stands as the prime example of Richler's use of fantasy and reality in Son of a Smaller Hero. If Noah learns anything at all in the course of the novel, it is that the actual situation can only be reconciled with the dream at a cost of tremendous mental anguish.

Thus, at the end of the novel, Melech Adler is left to

consider his own shattered dream of power and authority. Abandoned by his family, he finds himself bound by the fate he has chosen, and envious of Noah's ability to pursue his own dream in Europe, where Melech's thoughts of freedom still lie. The gift of the scroll symbolizes the passing of moral authority from the old to the young, an authority already weakened by Noah's knowledge of Melech's dishonest dealings in the scrap-yard. The scroll is also a token of remembrance for Noah, indicative of the respect he still retains for his grandfather, not so much by virtue of Melech's status in the family, but as a true regard of one man for another.

While we may sympathize with Melech, Son of a Smaller Hero is very much the story of a young man's struggle. Although his search is not at an end, Noah has learned to beware the false sense of security that masks a dead end for characters like Shloime and Itzik Adler, both of whom are narrow-mindedly opposed to Noah's quest for the self. Even Noah's friend Mr. Panofsky, a man who "knew what he wanted," and "required a bigger reply than No" (203), is shown to be a dreamer, still believing in the virtues of communism, while his son Aaron, crippled in the Spanish Civil War, sits in a wheel-chair beside him.

It cannot be said that Noah has really triumphed in his escape, for, as the episode of the scrolls shows, the ties with his family and cultural heritage are still strong,

and his choice of flight to Europe seems too facile a way out. Noah's fantasy of freedom in Europe reminds us of André Bennett's fate on a similar quest. But if Noah understands what his struggle has been about, he will know that he cannot satisfactorily cope with reality by building his life on dreams.

Chapter III

A Choice of Enemies

In A Choice of Enemies, Richler returns to Europe for his setting, focusing on a colony of left-wing American expatriates in London. Although the novel deals peripherally with political beliefs in the post-McCarthy era, it would be a mistake to assume, as George Woodcock has done, that this is merely "a novel about what politics does to people,"[1] or as Pierre Cloutier insists, that it is "a novel of the end of ideologies."[2] For the struggle of the hero, Norman Price, is in many ways similar to those of André Bennett and Noah Adler in previous books: how to live with dignity and honour in a fallen world. Norman's quest for self-knowledge, if not self-definition, is essentially moral rather than political, as Marxism is only one of several ideals that Richler shows to be false.

Norman Price is a middle-aged Canadian expatriate, forced to abandon a teaching post in America because of his refusal to divulge his politics. Reduced to writing thrillers and film-scripts, Norman's adolescent wish for fame and sexual potency has given way to more realistic

[1] Woodcock, Mordecai Richler, p.30.

[2] Pierre Cloutier, "Mordecai Richler's Exiles: A Choice of Enemies," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 1, No.2 (Spring 1972), p.43.

desires: a wife and children, and time to complete a scholarly work on Dryden and his times. Norman's fantasies take the form of guilt feelings over his own failings and the inadequacies of his generation. Remembering his father who died in defence of Madrid, and Hornstein, the high-living pilot who crashed his plane in the Thames rather than endangering the lives of innocent citizens, Norman suffers from the knowledge of his own lack of courage and commitment:

> But in those days, Norman remembered fondly, the choice of enemies had been clear. Today you were no longer altogether sure. You signed the petitions, you defended Soviet art to liberals, and you didn't name old comrades. But your loyalties, like those of a shared childhood, were sentimental; they lacked true conviction.[3]

Norman's friends are also aware that he is not the same man he used to be. Joey Lawson, the wife of Norman's good friend Charlie, and at one time in love with Norman herself, reflects that "there had used to be things you couldn't do or write or say because Norman, Norman Price, Asst Prof. Norman Price, would call them dishonest. Today he wrote thrillers" (17). Norman recognizes this defect in himself and admires those who, like Charlie, are

[3] Richler, A Choice of Enemies (London: André Deutsch, 1957), p.76. Subsequent parenthetical references in this chapter will be to this edition.

participants in life. Norman takes vicarious delight in the life of his brother Nicky, seeing in him the part of his father that he himself can never emulate. Nicky's death destroys this part of Norman's fantasy world, and gives him an excuse to run away from his girl-friend, Sally MacPherson.

Sally, an innocent young Canadian, has come to Europe to experience those things that she imagines could never happen at home. Her dreams of glamour and excitement are directly opposed to Norman's wish for the security of marriage. "For her a rented room was an adventure. He remembered it as a place where you were alone. Terribly alone" (53).

Although Sally is at first disappointed that Norman is not the mixture of Hemingway and Fitzgerald that she had hoped for, she turns to him for companionship and affection. Their first attempt at love-making is interrupted by a phone-call that leaves Norman with a neurotic fear of rejection, balanced by an equally powerful desire for marriage with Sally. As with so many of Richler's characters, the fantasies of guilt and wish-fulfillment battle in Norman's mind, and cause his inability to act:

> Norman, after the first night's failure, had shied away from trying to make love to her again. He lived in perpetual fear of rejection. With the fear, though, he also had his dream. He and Sally were married, they had three children, and they

> were uniquely happy. They did not hang impressionist prints on their walls. Sally, like him, enjoyed making love in the mornings. But when the kids came that was seldom possible. The kids woke them early each morning, jumping up and down on their not-Swedish Modern double bed. (54)

It is interesting to note that Norman's dream of bourgeois security specifically excludes the trappings of middle-class furniture, a typically liberal gesture of non-commitment.

Sally's dreams are quickly soured when she is faced with the reality of the London streets. "At night the parade of depraved itchy faces, men in black rubber trenchcoats and whores past the indecent age, was the most appalling she had ever seen" (67). The London theatre is no more than a second-rate Broadway, and like other Canadians, Sally feels a strong sense of betrayal:

> The choice of coming to England, where the streets were paved with poets, rather than to the United States bespoke of a certain spiritual superiority, so they were appalled to discover that this country was infinitely more materialistic than their own, where possessions were functional, naturally yours, and not the prize of single-minded labour. They were surprised to discover that they had arrived too late. (158)

Sally begins to miss the comfort and security of the world in which she was raised, but in Norman's absence she makes a desperate attempt for novelty in an affair with a young

East German refugee, Ernst Haupt.

Ernst, a former Hitler Youth and Communist Party member, has fled East Germany in search of freedom in the West. He is uncomfortable with ideologies, having seen his father, who refused to take a stand, imprisoned by both the Nazis and the communists. Ruthless and impetuous, Ernst seems on the surface to be quite the opposite of Norman, who nevertheless befriends him for Sally's sake. By a cruel irony, it is Ernst who is the murderer of Norman's brother Nicky. However contrived a plot device this may seem, it allows Richler to reveal many similarities between Ernst and Norman that are far more striking in the context of their expected antipathy.

Ernst's affection for his father and resentment at the treatment accorded the old man parallel Norman's reverence for his own father, and in killing Nicky, Ernst indirectly forces Norman to come to terms with himself. Ernst's nightmares over the murder of Nicky are counter-pointed to Norman's memory of Hornstein, and his own crash. Both acted impulsively--one killed to save his life; the other saved his life by putting others in danger. Both bear scars, emotional as well as physical, from their wartime experiences. And Ernst, like Norman, entertains fantasies of success and conformity:

> For years he had dreamt that one day he would be introduced into an intelligent society of artists and professional people. In this fantasy he saw himself as a man with a faithful wife and children, giving small dinner parties and being invited to others. There were no uniforms. All crimes, all hungers, and penniless days were done. People like Norman enjoyed his company. They did not think of him as a German. He was well-liked. Honourable. Another happy conformist. (93)

But in another way, Ernst bears more resemblance to Karp, Norman's grotesque landlord. Both are "survivors" from the second World War, living in fear of renewed persecution. They are unable to assimilate as they would like to do, and are consequently branded as outsiders. Ernst is disparaged as "a little Nazi" because he was in the Hitler Youth and fled the communist world. Karp is rejected in Israel because he survived the concentration camps. Richler's survivors must live by their own wits, without help or comfort. "They are frequently the floating debris of the wreckage of the modern period and this mental set conditions them to ruthlessness, emotional detachment and scepticism."[4] They have no use for sentiment or political ideals.

On the other hand, Norman's émigré friends are equally survivors, but in their blind acceptance of left-wing

[4] Sheps, Introduction to Mordecai Richler, p.xv.

politics, they are oblivious to the real world, which is why Ernst presents such a threat to their community, and why they close ranks against him. Their left-wing prejudices are as ludicrous as the accusations of the McCarthyites who forced them out of the States not long before. Colin Horton's pompous praise of the Communist Party seems absurd in the face of Ernst's experience. Ostracized for his championing of Ernst, Norman comes to the understanding that politics is not a question of ideals, but power, and he must look elsewhere for the values by which a decent man can live.

Another kind of idealism is reflected in Charlie Lawson's dream of success as a writer. Unsuccessful in Canada, Charlie has come to London to prove to himself and the world that he is capable of greatness. But his script is secretly given to Norman to improve, and Charlie winds up taking Winkleman's children to the zoo rather than dining with him. In a desperate attempt to hide his inferiority complex, Charlie tells funny stories, turning the harsh reality of the present into the fantasy of a hard-luck past: "Once more the cold-water flat and the hack work were, as Charlie put it then, fodder for the sensational autobiography he would write afterwards, like Sean O'Casey" (139). Like Theo Hall, Charlie fears cuckoldry, and constantly exposes himself to ridicule. His only justification is that he is at least willing to get his hands dirty, rather

than run away as Norman does.

From the examples of his friends, Norman learns that he cannot live by extravagant fantasies, that he must set his sights lower, and taking a cue from Ernst, that survival is the essential triumph of man. In his amnesiac state, Norman becomes obsessed with retrieving a balloon from the roof of the train station, symbolically showing modern man, stripped of his identity, in a desperate struggle to reach an impossible goal which is in reality only air and must disappear anyway. Norman recovers his identity the morning after the incident, and now seems aware of what the age demands:

> Slumped glumly in the corner Norman recalled something he had once read in an Atlas somewhere. Off Vancouver Island there was a vast area of sea known as the zone of silence. No sound penetrated this sea. A stillness prevailed. And since no siren or bell warned ships of dangerous reefs the floor of the zone of silence was strewn with wrecks. This, he thought, was surely an age of silence. A time of collisions. A place strewn with wrecks. This time of opinions, battle-stations, and no absolutes, was also a time to consolidate. This time of no heroes but hyperbole, where treason was only loyalty looked at closely, and faith, honour, and courage had become the small change of crafty politicians, was also a time to persevere. To persevere was a most serious virtue. (253)

A Choice of Enemies embodies Richler's most devastating assertion that those who build their lives on fantasies are

inevitably destroyed. Only Norman, who finds himself by losing his identity, is granted a reprieve. Sally MacPherson, hoping to jar her lover into allowing her to have his child, mixes sleeping pills with gin, and dies while he is attending a party. Winkleman's communist beliefs are shattered when he learns about anti-Semitism in the U.S.S.R., and Colin Horton realizes he has fought for the ruling power in a totalitarian state. Charlie Lawson has to return to Toronto to become a success, while Ernst saves the life of a Montreal Jew, and is forced into marriage with a Nazi sympathizer.

In accepting married life with Vivian, Norman, espouses the virtues of "moral privacy and a capacity for compromise"[5] that seem to fit Richler's own conception of what is needed for survival. Norman is no longer interested in pursuing the dreams of his youth, while Vivian sees him, ironically, as the answer to her dreams of excitement and glamour, just as Sally has done. Nevertheless, Norman's "triumph" is really a rejection of commitment, and as one critic puts it, Richler's achievement may lie in the ambiguity of his conclusion.[6] Norman may possess "the strength of being not-quite-wholly defined,"[7] but his choice of enemies has yet to be made.

[5] Cloutier, p.49.

[6] See Peter Dale Scott, "A Choice of Certainties," Tamarack Review, No.8 (Summer 1958), p.81.

[7] Ibid., p.74.

In these first three novels, Richler presents a world whose inhabitants are strikingly alike in their feelings of guilt and inferiority, their need for self-expression and self-definition, and their questioning of hypocrisy and bourgeois values that attempt to claim their allegiance. In his most successful characterizations, "The figures of the romantic individualist and the survivor merge."[8] If, as David Sheps insists, these characters wish "to exist in a state of disembodied ecstasy,"[9] Richler demonstrates the impossibility of this dream, and the mental tensions it produces. For, as Peter Scott says, "their own need for self-expression is at war with another need, the need to belong."[10] Thus, they may fail as rebels, for they are unable to burn their bridges behind them. Recognizing the limitations of this approach, Richler turns to a different kind of dream in his next novel, involving a more subtle exposition of the existential concerns of his earlier work. We shall see though, that the same tension between the dream and its realization is a major theme of this more mature work.

[8] Sheps, p.xvi.

[9] Ibid., p.xx.

[10] Scott, p.79.

Chapter IV

The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz

The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz represents a significant advance in Richler's craft; it towers over its predecessors in the superb handling of character, dialogue and tone.[1] The most obvious difference in technique between this and the earlier novels is the sense of an ironic balance, the detachment of author and protagonist in their points of view, which allows Richler the mature writer to view his hero with a slightly more jaundiced eye. Certainly Richler shows himself to be more adept at manipulating his readers' responses to the characters he creates. In this novel, the fast-paced switches of scene, quick exchanges of dialogue, and other film techniques are aptly suited to depiction of the frantic pace of Duddy's life. But despite these stylistic differences, and the uniqueness of the chief character, Duddy Kravitz is similar to the other novels in its examination of the theme this study has sought to trace. We shall see that this work is equally concerned with the gap between the fantastic

[1] In conversation with Graeme Gibson, Richler has said, "I don't think I really found my own style until Duddy Kravitz, and then it all became easier in a way because it was all my own. I felt confident then for better or for worse, this was the way I wanted to write." See Gibson, Eleven Canadian Novelists (Toronto: Anansi, 1973), p.279.

element of Duddy's dream and the reality of his achievement.

Perhaps Richler's greatest triumph in his fourth novel is the creation of Duddy Kravitz, whose ruthlessness recalls Noah and Ernst, but whose vibrancy and indomitable energy are unique among Richler's heroes. Not at all "resigned and defeated"[2] as David Sheps infers, Duddy is incredibly buoyant and manages to evoke our sympathy despite his harsh treatment of some of the weaker characters in the book. In fact, Duddy's ruthlessness provides much of the humour. As Warren Tallman suggests, "the comedy consists mostly in a reversal of the usual tragic dilemma in which a protagonist wears his hopes and chances away against the high shores of this unobliging world. In this novel the protagonist proposes and the world serves up suitable victims."[3]

When we first see Duddy Kravitz, he is the leader of his high-school gang, seemingly because of his quick wits, and his ability to tell a better tale than the next boy. The fictitious brother Bradley is an attempt on Duddy's part to raise himself in the estimation of his peers: "'As

[2] Sheps, Introduction to Mordecai Richler, p.xi. Sheps goes on to say that "Richler's characters, for all their ambition and energy, really know from the beginning that either they are defeated or their outcomes will be much drearier than their apparent victories might indicate." (pp.xi-xii) Although he then cites Duddy Kravitz as an example, it is difficult to believe that, given his innocence, Duddy knows beforehand the true nature of his victory.

[3] Warren Tallman, "Richler and the Faithless City," Canadian Literature, No.3 (Winter 1960), p.63.

soon as I'm finished up at Fletcher's Field he wants me to come down to Arizona to help out on the ranch like.'"[4] The other boys recognize the lie, but they never challenge Duddy, as he is their unquestioned leader.

His viciousness is manifested in his destruction of Mr. MacPherson's dream. As the first representative of stagnant liberal values in the novel, MacPherson plays a similar role to that of Theo Hall in Son of a Smaller Hero, the victim who compromises his integrity as well as his marriage in an effort to assimilate the hardened ghetto youth into bourgeois Anglo-Saxon society. Like Theo, MacPherson dreams of friendly get-togethers with his students, of forming a club "as was usually done in movies about delinquents" (32). At the same time, he acknowledges that he is a failure in life, an alcoholic saddled with an invalid wife, clinging only to the one ideal of his youth, that of never strapping a boy. In fact, it is Duddy's insolence that causes MacPherson to break this resolution of twenty years' standing, but not until after a midnight phone call from Duddy results in the death of his wife. A broken man, MacPherson is left in Duddy's wake considering his shattered ideals, but his last words to Duddy are

[4] Richler, The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1959), p.11. Subsequent parenthetical references in this chapter will be to this edition.

prophetic: "'You'll go far, Kravits. You're going to go very far'" (39). The irony should not go unnoticed, even at this early point in the novel.

Duddy accepts this sacrifice as a necessary stage in his apprenticeship. Duddy's stature increases by fits and starts, as, one by one, Richler destroys the illusions of his other characters, reducing their status to that of pitiful losers. But Duddy clings defiantly to his grandfather's words: "'A man without land is nobody. Remember that, Duddel'" (48). As Duddy tramples over the bodies of enemies and friends alike, he always keeps his eventual goal in mind--to turn fantasy into reality. And unlike Richler's other heroes, Duddy is apparently successful.

To understand the measure of Duddy's success though, it is essential to determine the exact nature of his dream. Duddy wants to be a somebody, but the examples he has to draw from are not encouraging. There is Mr. Cohen who is sympathetic to Duddy's struggle, but has only cunning without energy. Having worked hard all his life, buying off inspectors and cheating the goyim, to build a dream house for his wife, Cohen finds that he only feels at home in the kitchen. He cannot even indulge his passion for smoked meat unless his wife is out of town. Hugh Thomas Calder, the rich Westmount tycoon, has also found that money can't buy him happiness. To amuse himself, he drops

hundred-dollar bills into urinals, and tries to guess who plucked them out. Duddy despises these rich men, and uses them, not as models, but as pawns in his struggle to become a somebody.

At one point, Duddy feels that he might want to be another Jerry Dingleman, but changes his mind when he finds that the celebrated Boy Wonder is unknown outside of St. Urbain Street. Duddy's dreams extend further than the boundaries of the ghetto, but unlike Noah Adler, he knows exactly what he wants--not wealth, but status. In his dream of turning Lac St. Pierre into another Grossinger's, Duddy reflects more on the fame that this will bring him than the material rewards. He would be a philanthropist:

> There could have been his grandfather on the farm and everybody saying how Duddy was the easiest touch in town, allowing ten St. Urbain Street boys into the camp free each season, helping out Rubin with his mortgage after the fire there, paying a head-shrinker fortunes to make a man out of Irwin Shubert, his enemy of old ("Throwing good money after bad," people said), building a special house for the epileptic who had been working for him in those bygone days of his struggles, and giving so many benefit nights for worthy causes. They would have said that he was cultured too. "A patron of Hersh in the early days. The great man's best friend." (330)

His ventures into film-making and pinball machines are never more than ploys to get the money which he immediately turns into land. Although he doesn't hesitate to swindle his

friends if necessary, Duddy wins our sympathy by his steadfast commitment to one goal, and can even be seen as more moral than the other characters "because he is moved by natural and spontaneous desires while they are moved by dead precepts whose validity they have never examined."[5]

A case in point is Duddy's cameraman, Peter John Friar, another alcoholic like MacPherson, who tries to mask his failure by invoking his own pretended ideals. The scene in which Friar stands naked amidst the debris in his room, decrying the injustice of his "persecution", is a masterpiece of comic irony:

> "I am a card-holder," Mr. Friar said in a booming voice. He stood up and the New Yorker dropped to the floor. "I tell you that here but no committee could drag it out of me with wild horses. Do you realize what that means?" Mr. Friar touched Duddy's knee. He lowered his voice. "I fled the United States one step ahead of the FBI. I'm on the blacklist."
> "No kidding!"
> "I must be. I've never attempted to conceal my beliefs." (133-34)

The desperate "must" undermines Friar's integrity; it is the only way he can rationalize his failure. Similarly, Duddy's epileptic friend Virgil, whose life ambition "is to organize the epileptics of the world. . . . to be their Sister Kenny" (242), is shown to be incapable of achievement. A poet manqué, a crusader without a sword, Virgil is simply too kind a person to ever be more than a loser, and proves

[5] Woodcock, Mordecai Richler, p.37.

a willing victim for Duddy's schemes.

Duddy's loyalty to his family may seem curious as both Max and Lennie Kravitz are losers in the same sense as Virgil is. Both cling to dreams which are shown to be false in the course of the novel. Lennie, who has always had the benefit of his Uncle Benjy's patronage, dreams of becoming a doctor and ends up botching an abortion. Lennie cannot come to terms with the predatory world of the ghetto, and instead tries to escape through assimilation as Irwin Shubert has done. But he finds to his sorrow that he has begged entrance to an equally harsh society, in which he is at best a second-class citizen. Finally he settles for an escape, which, like Noah's, avoids the necessity of moral choice. His platitudes about Israel recall the fantasies of Noah's school-friends, who are so caught up in the illusion of a fairy-tale land of milk and honey, that they cannot see the obvious hardships that await them.

Max Kravitz's credo, "This world is full of shits," functions like Lennie's "Anatomy is the big killer," as a rationalization of his own failure. Max's dream is not of his own success, however, but of his relationship with the Boy Wonder, whose intimate he pretends to be. Max's forte is his ability to forge the myth of the Wonder's success story, a tale that Duddy takes to heart in his wish to be a somebody. But in the course of the novel, Duddy realizes that his father enjoys no special relationship

with Dingleman, and that the Boy Wonder himself is unworthy of adulation. Thus, it is doubly ironic that Max should begin the story of Duddy's success in exactly the same way he always tells the famous transfer story about the Wonder. Max's inability to see Dingleman and his own son for what they really are is symptomatic of the kind of blindness to appearances that characterizes nearly everyone in the book except Duddy. "All of the other people in the novel cannot possess themselves because their vital energies are devoted full-time to maintaining the false appearances in terms of which they identify themselves."[6]

There are two apparent exceptions to this statement who immediately spring to mind--Duddy's girl-friend Yvette, and his grandfather Simcha Kravitz. On closer examination, however, these two prove equally flawed in their approach to life. While Yvette is sympathetically portrayed as a long-suffering, devoted Girl Friday, who gives up her job and her family to help Duddy, she has more than a trace of Miriam Hall's possessiveness and dream of romantic love. Her fondness for Friar, who professes to adore her, touches off a quarrel with Duddy, whose love-making is as fast and furious as his business wheeling and dealing. And her sympathy for Virgil is almost maudlin in its intensity.

[6] Warren Tallman, "Wolf in the Snow," Part II--"The House Repossessed," Canadian Literature, No.6 (Autumn 1960), p.45.

Yvette sees through Duddy and is not afraid to stand up to him, but to accept her judgment of his actions is to ignore her own blindness to reality. In the dog-eat-dog world of the ghetto, her retreat is quite as unacceptable as Friar's, Lennie's, or young Hersh's. In Duddy Kravitz's world, the meek never inherit the earth.

Duddy's grandfather is equally horrified by the unscrupulous methods used to obtain the land, but as A.R. Bevan points out, "Ironically, it is the comment of Simcha Kravitz, the chief representative in the novel of the old lost world of solid virtues and sound values, that turns his grandson into a person possessed of a materialistic demon."[7] Although the zeyda turns away from the land that Duddy has promised him, having learned from Yvette the circumstances of its acquisition, there remains the very real suggestion made by Dingleman that the old man cannot cope with a dream come true; that for so many years he and the rest of his generation have treated the idea of possessing land as a fairy-tale to impress their grandchildren, that the realization of the dream is an affront to their sheltered, acquiescent lives:

[7] A.R. Bevan, Introduction to the New Canadian Library edition of The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969), p.6.

> "Sitting in their dark cramped ghetto corners, they wrote the most mawkish, schoolgirlish stuff about green fields and sky. Terrible poetry, but touching when you consider the circumstances under which it was written. Your grandfather doesn't want any land. He wouldn't know what to do with it." (369)

There remains Uncle Benjy, perhaps the most unjustly treated of Duddy's "victims". Stuck with a barren, unfaithful wife and forced to feign impotency throughout his married life, Uncle Benjy ignores Duddy to lavish his affection on Lennie, who proves a disappointment to him. But in the end, it is Benjy who really understands the tension in Duddy's character--the two very different people he can be:

> There's more to you than mere money-lust, Duddy, but I'm afraid for you. You're two people, that's why. The scheming little bastard I saw so easily and the fine, intelligent boy underneath that your grandfather, bless him, saw. But you're coming of age soon and you'll have to choose. A boy can be two, three, four potential people, but a man is only one. He murders the others. (328)

Benjy's comments point to the ambivalence of Duddy's triumph. Unlike Simcha Kravitz and the others, Duddy has succeeded in turning fantasy into reality. But at what cost? Perhaps, as William H. New says, "The identity that he finally achieves, successful in spite of its disregard for social convention, is both typical of the

society he has been scorning and yet beyond it."[8] It is possible that Duddy has become another Jerry Dingleman, an inhuman grotesque devoid of compassion and moral standards. Like many another picaresque hero, he may be merely "a rogue in a world full of roguery" who "cannot love or feel strong emotion."[9] But Duddy has already shown, in the affection he bears his family and the guilt he feels about Virgil's situation, that he is at times capable of very human qualities of love and compassion. Indeed, it may be the dream itself, and not the man, that is corrupt. What Richler seems to be saying here, as in his other works, is that a dream never takes shape in the way we wish it, and that those who dare to reach their dream do not emerge unscathed. "When the self is born, the struggle is only just begun."[10]

[8] William H. New, "The Apprenticeship of Discovery," Canadian Literature, No.29 (Summer 1966), p.20.

[9] Stuart Miller, The Picaresque Novel (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1967), p.131.

[10] Tallman, "Richler and the Faithless City," p.64.

Chapter V

The Incomparable Atuk

If The Incomparable Atuk has suffered from a lack of critical attention, it is probably for the better. The book is, as George Woodcock delicately remarks, "slight alike in physical bulk and literary weight."[1] But a study of this work does add to the understanding of the theme of fantasy and reality in Richler's fiction. On the surface, it would seem that in its framework of wild exaggeration of characterization and plot, that Richler's use of fantasy in Atuk is outside the range of this study, which concentrates on internal fantasies and their relation to the external worlds of the novels.[2] Yet, Atuk does have some relevance to the theme of this study in its examination of the frustration of hopes and dreams in some of the major

[1] Woodcock, Mordecai Richler, p.44.

[2] Critical opinions of Atuk have tended to place the novel in the categories of satirical fantasy or farce. Compare, for instance, George Woodcock's comment: "It represents a stage in the shift away from realism towards a background of total fantasy as the satirist's appropriate framework," Mordecai Richler, p.46, and Leslie Fiedler's remark in "Some Notes on the Jewish Novel in English," The Running Man, 1, No.2 (July-August 1968), rpt. in Mordecai Richler, ed. G. David Sheps, p.104, that in Atuk, Richler moves "closer and closer to a level of farce and fantasy whose connections with reality are more like those of a Mack Sennet Comedy than a novel of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century." For similar views, see John Carroll, "On Richler and Ludwig," Tamarack Review, No.29 (Autumn 1963), pp.98-100, and Myers, "Mordecai Richler as Satirist."

characters, and the satirical lampooning of societal illusions, for which Richler is chiefly known.

The title of the first section of the book, "What You Dare to Dream, Dare to Do," describes the task of Atuk, an Eskimo whose poetry has been discovered by a Toronto advertising executive, Rory Peel. Atuk's first book proves to be an enormous success, and he is flown down to Toronto as the protégé of Prof. Norman Gore. There he views the attractions of the big city: ". . . a midget wrestling match, a striperama, Rabbi Glenn Seigal's Temple, and other wonders of Toronto."[3] Attracted by the glamour of the city, and dissatisfied with his literary achievement, Atuk determines, like Duddy Kravitz, to be a somebody. He wants to do something concrete for his people, and so starts his own business by locking his family into a basement apartment and instructing them to turn out Eskimo sculpture. With a mixture of ruthless sophistication and wide-eyed innocence, Atuk goes about the business of making money. He enters every contest, frequents every store offering give-aways, and believes that with a little luck he will soon be rich:

[3] Richler, The Incomparable Atuk (London: André Deutsch, 1963), p.13. Subsequent parenthetical references in this chapter will be to this edition.

> Atuk kept his radio tuned to CJFD all night, just in case Night Owl phoned to find out if he was listening and offered him a free television set, washing machine or wrist-watch with automatic calendar and built-in alarm. As he ate breakfast he memorized the first twenty tunes on the hit parade, not one to be caught off guard should Guess the Melody pick his number out of the phone book and offer riches. Because he took the Standard each morning he was entitled to a free accident policy and as he had the Gazette delivered to his door he was automatically covered against harm by hurricane. (47)

Richler's satire is of course directed at both the advertising and the mentality of those who believe in it. In any case, Atuk soon begins to realize that success is more a case of oneupmanship than luck. Shunning the advice of Gore and Peel, Atuk tries to match wits with the legendary Buck Twentyman, the mastermind of every monetary coup in the country. Making a bid for riches on a new quiz show, Stick Out Your Neck, Atuk is sacrificed to stir up anti-American feelings that will redound to Twentyman's advantage.

Thus capsulized, the plot seems thin, and indeed suffers from a lack of cohesion; the many tangents exploring individual quirks only rarely intersect. Attempting an all-embracing satiric tour-de-force, Richler fails to develop the inhabitants of Atuk's world as anything more than grotesque humours. What they have in common is an exaggerated

sense of their self-importance trying to mask their inferiority. The characters in Richler's fictional Toronto who achieve some measure of fame and fortune do so only as a result of the people's need for heroes, idols around which to build their fantasies.

For instance, Bette Dolan, the Canadian dream-girl who becomes famous for her record-breaking swim across Lake Ontario, succeeds only because her father refuses to pull her out of the water, instead holding up signs telling her of the wealth they will enjoy if she makes it. Adored by the public, Bette lends her name and presence to the most banal of events: "In earlier times she would have come forth to bless churches, but in Canada, things being what they were, she pulled the switch on new power projects and opened shopping centres here, there, and everywhere" (27-28). Supposedly incorruptible, Bette is seduced by Atuk, and becomes a nymphomaniac, recalling Miriam Hall, when Atuk drops her.

Richler is always adept at pointing up the contrast between reality and illusion. Thus, not only is Canada's sweetheart corrupt, but her mentor, Doc Burt Parks, is a charlatan, staging fake muscleman exhibitions designed to evoke sympathy as well as wonder from a gullible audience. And yet he can say with conviction, "'I'm world-famous . . . all over Canada'" (40).

Atuk's discoverer, Rory Peel, is one of the most

intriguing characters in the book, if only in his eclecticism, but seems to play little part in the action. Peel is another in the long line of racially-conscious Jews in Richler's fiction, from Barney Larkin in The Acrobats to Jake Hersh of St. Urbain's Horseman. Careful to let everyone know that he is a Jew, Peel winces when anyone of his faith commits a social faux pas. To demonstrate that he is free of prejudice, he hires a German maid, who has to play the enemy whenever he runs a bomb-shelter drill. He cannot walk in the park without the fear that he will be regarded as a child molester, and though a Zionist himself, makes fun of Atuk for wanting land for the Eskimo people.

The famous Toronto drama critic, Seymour Bone, known as the rudest man in Canada, spends most of his time publicizing himself. Considered an iconoclast in the west, Bone's ideas appeared tame when he arrived in Toronto, but he was quickly educated by his radical girl-friend Ruthy Rosenthal. Their marriage proves unorthodox at best, and a disappointment to both. Ruthy won't cook the Jewish food that Seymour craves, while the lusty tiger she had fantasized turns out to be a pussycat in bed. In fact, they remain together only to spite their chauvinistic parents.

Ironically, Bone only became a celebrity when his book was lampooned in Time and the Spectator. As a drama critic, he acquires an undeserved reputation for walking out on

plays, and has to sneak back in disguise the next night to see the rest of the production. Of course he must maintain the illusion of himself as Canada's rudest man, for it is that, and not ability, that has won him the position of eminence he holds. Like Mr. Friar in Duddy Kravitz, Bone tries to excuse his lack of American exposure as the price he must pay for his left-wing views. The reality is much simpler:

> 'Hm.' The Colonel went to the cabinet marked LUNATIC FRINGE and dug out the Bone dossier. 'Did he tell you that he can't get into the States? They're afraid to let him in?'
> Jock nodded.
> 'They'd let him in all right. Truth is he's afraid to go there. Here he's Mr Big, there he's unknown. Too much competition for him there, I suppose.' (88)

The satiric portrait of Bone can be seen as a caricature of Nathan Cohen, whose scathing critique of Richler's early novels has been cited above. But the resemblance to other Canadian personalities is tenuous at best in the other characters, who are only sketchily portrayed. There is Harry Snipes, the editor of Metro, the magazine for cool canucks, who pretends that his insulin injection is really morphine; Mr. Panofsky, determined to prove his thesis that all goys are alike by switching babies in the hospital; Rabbi Seigal, who is less concerned with the ritual of his faith than the fame

that it can bring him; and of course, Gore, the soft-hearted liberal, who sees himself as the protector of all minority groups: "Indeed, the Professor adored Jews and Negroes so much that he felt put out when they exhibited human traits" (135). Richler's contention in exposing the conceits and fantasies of these minor figures seems to fit Panofsky's thesis that "'the most boring, mediocre man in the world is the White Protestant goy, northern species, and in Canada he has found his true habitat'" (142).

Richler also attacks racial prejudice and assimilation through Atuk's conversion to Judaism, and the nationalistic prejudices of the Eskimos. As a victim of society, Atuk acquires his Jewishness by right it seems, while the exploited Eskimos appear to be the anti-Semites. Parodying Duddy's realization, Atuk's chief, the Old One, says,"'Atuk, it's hard to be an Eskimo'" (98-99).[4] Richler has never been slow to condemn Canadian nationalism,[5] and in Atuk he is especially critical of the illusion of self-importance that Canadians attach to themselves. The anti-American

[4] Cf. The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz, p.348: "'It's hard to be a gentleman--a Jew, I mean--it's hard to be.'"

[5] See, for instance, the essays "O Canada" in Hunting Tigers Under Glass, and "Maple Leaf Culture Time" in Shovelling Trouble.

uprising at the end of the book points to a national fantasy that shows a need for debunking:

> The Canadians spoke up.
> A mechanic who had been fired by General Motors; a man whose Buick had broken down and another with a GE mix-master that didn't work; a widow who had bought oil shares in a Texas swamp; another whose most unforgettable character had been rejected by the Reader's Digest; a couple who had been asked for their marriage license in a Florida motel; a retired army officer who, presenting a twenty-dollar bill in a New York restaurant, had been asked, 'What's this, baby? Monopoly money . . .'; people who didn't like last week's Ed Sullivan show or felt they ought to give Toronto a major league baseball team; some who recalled Senator McCarthy; a man whose claim against All-State hadn't been honoured; a politician who had never made the Canadian section of Time; and more, many more, wrote to their newspapers, phoned their local television stations, and wired their MPs. (181-82)

Like the youthful heroes of The Acrobats and Son of a Smaller Hero, the Canadians in Atuk can only define themselves by what they are against, in this case the irresistible force of American culture, against which the Canadians are powerless.

The illusion of power seems to be a major theme of the novel, and Richler is quick to point out the impotence of his characters to control their own destinies. Since their self-delusions are partly the delusions of society

as a whole, they do not emerge as individuals, but instead fade into a background of absurdity. Richler's intent, however, is still the same: to show the irreconcilable tension between the actual and the ideal.

Chapter VI

Cocksure

Cocksure is a far more satisfying piece of work than Atuk, although Richler's intention is again satirical, and the actions are equally absurd. A rather superficial framing plot concerns the ageless Star Maker, Hollywood producer extraordinaire, and his attempts to take over and direct the operations of London's Oriole Press. Fitted with an ever-changing supply of vital organs, the Star Maker can not only independently produce his own offspring, but has his stars manufactured to laboratory specifications. It is important to note that while the Star Maker obviously belongs to a world of unreality, his creations are acceptable because they fit the demands of society's fantasies, which Richler shows to be hollow, reprehensible, and even indecent. Thus, the Star, idol of a generation, is successful because he is "the most satisfyingly two-dimensional."[1] In such a world, values, taste, and decorum are always mutable, even totally reversed from our moral norms. This is the world of Camus's Sisyphus:

[1] Richler, Cocksure (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1968), p.83. Subsequent parenthetical references in this chapter will be to this edition.

> A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.[2]

There are, of course, some notable differences: the world of Cocksure is comically burlesque, and not entirely inexplicable, and Richler's Sisyphus is incapable of submitting to the insanity around him, however much he would like to be part of it. Mortimer Griffin, for all his faults, exhibits a certain stoical abstention from the follies of his society, representing a sane point of view in a vast wasteland of chaos. This is not to say that he is more noble, more attractive, more prescient, than any of the other characters in the novel, but that he earns our sympathy, as does Meursault in L'Etranger, because he is so obviously a victim of society's evils, as well as tragically the perpetrator of his own downfall, through his unwillingness to compromise.

Yet another Canadian expatriate, Mortimer suffers many of the same fears and fantasies that plague previous characters of Richler's, but in his vulnerability, he is

[2] Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. by Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p.5.

most reminiscent of Norman Price. In a society that professes to admire non-conformity, Mortimer is despairingly staid and old-fashioned. Tall, handsome, and clean-cut, he radiates an aura of establishment ideals that is anathema to his ultra-liberal wife Joyce. They are irremediably opposed on almost every issue; she vociferously, he quietly and guiltily. In bed at night, Joyce reads The Story of O, while Mortimer curls up with The Best of Leacock. He is careful not to show affection towards their son Doug, for fear that Joyce will make fun of his sentimentality. Super-conscious of racial prejudice and totalitarianism, Joyce recommends Negro candidates for Mortimer's job, and refuses to buy food from countries with right-wing governments. Mortimer is equally conscious of racial prejudice, but is terribly afraid that he may offend unintentionally. Thus, he lines up behind a coloured girl in the bank, rather than go to an unoccupied teller. When the girl drops a glove, Mortimer is thrown into agonies of indecision; he does not want to appear presumptuous or condescending in retrieving it, and in the end, the girl has to pick it up herself. Like so many other Richler heroes, Mortimer is unable to act decisively.

Mortimer's boss at Oriole Press, "saintly" Lord Woodcock, who has compiled a book on the charitable deeds of Germans to Jews during World War Two, insists that his employees perform some sort of community service in their leisure

hours. As a result, Mortimer delivers a series of lectures on "Reading for Pleasure" where he meets Jacob Shalinsky, a militant Jew like Panofsky in Ayuk. Shalinsky insists that Mortimer is a Jew, and when Mortimer laughingly relates the incident to his co-editor and best friend Hy Rosen, he quickly loses both friend and credibility. Unable to explain his fear of being labelled a Jew, Mortimer appears to be anti-Semitic, or as Joyce says, "'a cesspool of received WASP ideas'" (23).

In fact, Mortimer exhibits most of the typical fantasies of the middle-aged WASP, and some of the Jew. His sexual fantasies include a fear of latent homosexuality, which becomes so strong that he flees if a man even speaks to him. He worries about the length of his penis, perusing Masters and Johnson for charts and graphs that will reassure him. He imagines that as a WASP, he is sexually inferior to Jews and Negroes, and rationalizes his wife's adultery with his friend Ziggy Spicehandler, by concluding that Ziggy's Jewish penis is bigger than his own.

Terribly self-conscious of his own stodginess, Mortimer admires Ziggy for his iconoclasm and apparent disdain for worldly matters, and envies Ziggy's ugly, dishevelled appearance which makes him irresistible to women. To impress his friend, Mortimer messes up his own house to show his disregard for material possessions, nevertheless conscious of the hypocrisy of his actions.

For there is a basic decency and self-awareness in Mortimer that prevents him from being completely swallowed by his inferiority complex and his guilt fantasies:

> And yet--and yet--something in Mortimer refused to accept that he was a homosexual. A more sensible inner voice assured him that it was a slight tendency, no more, a containable drive magnified in his mind, because he unconsciously appreciated how dull he was, a placid WASP with a regular job, and only craved depravity in the hope it would make him more interesting to such as Ziggy Spicehandler. (72-73)

Given a chance to pose as an eccentric, Mortimer is not about to disillusion his audience. Once regarded as a prude by the regulars in the local pub, Mortimer now enjoys a reputation for lechery because one day he bought a tube of vaginal jelly for Joyce at the druggist's. Now the druggist furnishes him with a continual supply of sexual aids and stimulants, and the boys at the pub regard him as something of a connoisseur in sexual matters. Mortimer is naturally too ashamed to deny this undeserved reputation, and keeps all his purchases in a locked cupboard at home, occasionally disposing of small parcels of them when they threaten to overflow their hiding-place. Thus, Mortimer's fantasy of his own inadequacy is ironically denied in the fantasy of his friends at the pub.

Another example of this two-way identity crisis is Mortimer's appearance on the TV program Insult, a show

designed to reduce important people to the level of the masses by degrading their achievements in front of a large studio audience. When Mortimer is bullied into revealing his war experiences, he is mocked for his heroism in the rescue of an injured comrade, a deed which won him the Victoria Cross. His credo, "'I believe in the possibilities within each of us for goodness'" (221), is laughed at, but our sympathies are with Mortimer. His inferiority complex is harmless, unlike those of the studio audience, who must humiliate others in order not to hate themselves.

Mortimer's friends exemplify the destructive, conceited kind of fantasy that Richler loves to excoriate. Hy Rosen imagines himself as a Jewish avenger, and a great boxer in a long line of illustrious Jewish pugilists. Despite his diminutive stature, he regularly ventures into the street, abusing passersby and picking fights with people he imagines to be anti-Semites. His wife perpetuates his fantasies by protecting him with a hockey stick on his avenging forays, and pretending to be afraid of his fighting prowess and sexual vigour. Hy deserves no apologies from Mortimer, but the latter is too guilt-ridden to stand up to his friend's jibes.

Ziggy Spicehandler, as mentioned above, professes to have no regard for material wealth, but he never pays for anything that he can foist on Mortimer, and like Seymour

Bone in Atuk spends a good deal of his time publicising his own actions, and trying to shock society, no easy task in a world where very little is beyond belief or approval. Having attended Rugby and Oxford under his real name, Gerald Spencer, Ziggy went to Paris where he wrote a pornographic novel using his family's names. But on returning to England, Ziggy "discovered that his Anglicized name, his expensive middle-class education, his knowledge of stage classics, Latin, Greek, his unexcelled elocution, had all contrived to make him singularly ill-equipped for life in modern England" (141-42). So Ziggy decided to become a bum. And now that he is filthy, ill-mannered, and incredibly popular with women, he is everything that Mortimer would love to be but cannot. The urge to let the immoralist within him come to the surface is always repressed by Mortimer, and this has partly to do with his strait-laced Canadian upbringing, which he can never entirely repudiate. The qualities of respect and politeness that Mortimer acquired as a boy are further emphasized by the physical presence of his fourth-grade teacher, Miss Ryerson, who has come to London to fulfill a life-long dream. Like Sally MacPherson in A Choice of Enemies, Agnes Laura Ryerson has come to London prepared to be swept off her feet by the magnificence of the fabled city:

> Miss Ryerson's long-cherished fantasy picture of the mother country, more potent than any pot dream, was constructed almost entirely on literary foundations. Shakespeare, naturally, Jane Austen, The Illustrated London News, Kipling, Dickens, Beverley Baxter's London Letters in Macleans. (15)

But Mortimer can find no suitable entertainment for a little old lady from Caribou, Ontario. The theatre features plays on homosexuality, London's leading lady is a female impersonator, and the Queen's Guards haunt the gay bars. Her expectations are so completely dashed that one might expect her to feel the kind of depression that strikes Sally. But instead of moping, Miss Ryerson embarks on a one-woman crusade to save England. She becomes a teacher at Doug's highly progressive school, where the Christmas play is based on the writings of the Marquis de Sade and parent-teacher discussions revolve around the prescription of diaphragms for thirteen-year-olds. Miss Ryerson quickly upsets the whole intention of the school's lack of regimen by a unique method of encouraging hard work and good behaviour; she fellates the top-ranked boys. Unlike Mortimer, she accepts the absurdity of the situation, and proceeds to fight the world on its own terms. Miss Ryerson's ploy is only the logical extension of the reward of competition in a permissive society. Here Richler simultaneously pokes fun at the old standards and the new liberalism. Both ideals are capable of perversion.

In the same way, Richler uses the figure of the Star Maker to point out the dangers of fantasy when it becomes reality. In creating exciting biographies of otherwise drab individuals by arranging their deaths under lurid circumstances, the Star Maker panders to the public taste for scandal, for the outlandish events that never occur in their own lives. The ultimate horror of the Star Maker's manipulation of human life is not the absurdity of his mode of operation, but the acceptance of the situation by the world around him. It is a technique perfected by Kafka, and though the humour in Cocksure outweighs the horror, it is not difficult to see Mortimer's death in the same light as Gregor Samsa's. With his godlike powers over life and death, the Star Maker denies the right of independent existence to anyone who comes in contact with him. But this is not inappropriate in a society obsessed with wish-fulfillment for the Star Maker is the only one who can literally make of himself what he wants. He is "radically complete unto himself, the consummation of Romanticism."[3] Richler shows that to realise one's dreams at will is inhuman; no miracles await the Mortimer Griffins, the Norman Prices, or even the Duddy Kravitzs in his fiction.

[3] Sheps, Introduction to Mordecai Richler, p.xxii. For a discussion of possible interpretations of the Star Maker relating to the mass media, medecine, and the impersonal corporation or state, see Woodcock, Mordecai Richler, pp.52-53.

Richler, like many an effective satirist before him, never merely invents situations, but simply extrapolates a real event or idea that has already been carried to an extreme. In Gulliver's "Voyage to Laputa", Swift needed only a touch of hyperbole to demonstrate the nonsensical aspect of much of the experimentation going on in the Royal Academy in London at that time. Similarly, Richler's view of the absurdity of man's dependence on fantasy to sustain him in the struggle of life is made manifest in the character of Polly Morgan, whose ideas of sexual behaviour are so rooted in the silver screen that she moves from foreplay to post-coital exhaustion without the slightest suggestion of what the censor usually leaves on the cutting-room floor. Hollywood fantasy supplants natural instinct in her mind, and life must be as carefully acted out as the most insipid of soap-operas.

Mention should also be made of Shalinsky, another of Richler's memorable humours. He is a little man convinced of his own importance: "'I have published more letters to the editor than any other writer in England'" (242), he says. He suffers from the same feelings of persecution and self-pity as does Mortimer, making it easy for him to identify Mortimer as a Jew. Of course, in Mortimer's own mind, the fact of his circumcision, his fondness for chopped liver, and his role of scapegoat make it easy for him to be assimilated. But like Atuk and Duddy, he learns that "'It's

hard to be a Jew'" (245). Shalinsky is right when he says to Mortimer, "'Society is sick, not you'" (245). But Mortimer's willingness to believe is a symptom of society's ills as Richler sees them. It may be that "Mortimer is a Jew because in a society of professional non-conformists he happens to be a square."[4] But Mortimer is sacrificed by the Star Maker not because he is a Jew, but because he shows the ability to see through the phoniness of the world, the fantasy elements that everyone else takes for granted.

What Mortimer stands for is a last gasp of the traditional set of values. And he is tragically aware of his persecution for just these qualities:

> Yes, yes, Mortimer thought, a good credit risk, that's me. Loyal. Hardworking. Honest. Liberal. The well-dressed fellow on the bench in Zoo Story. The virtues I was raised to believe in have become pernicious. Contemporary writing, he thought, is clawing at my balls, making me repugnant to myself. An eyesore. "Protestant," he said aloud. "White Anglo-Saxon Protestant filth, that's what you are." (101-2)

It is ironic that Mortimer feels this way after trying to read Herzog, a novel that asserts the humanity of man, the same qualities that Mortimer reveres. But he is too caught up in his feelings of guilt and inferiority to

[4] Woodcock, Mordecai Richler, p.53.

understand the real purposes of the literature to which he is exposed. In correcting the balance, Richler does not condemn Baldwin, Mailer, Bellow or Jones, but attacks the liberal attitudes that reflect racial guilt in the face of these writers' accusations.

Cocksure then, is very much the vindication of one man's existence. Richler himself has said, "I was making a case for that much-abused man, the square."[5] Despite the limitations of his fears and fantasies, Mortimer is more human a character than any of the others in the novel. Their delusions are harmful, denigrating, and undifferentiated. Mortimer is human precisely because he is so unlike the denizens of his world.

[5] Quoted in Cameron, Conversations with Canadian Novelists, Part II, p.116.

Chapter VII

St. Urbain's Horseman

St. Urbain's Horseman is perhaps Richler's greatest achievement to date. In it he combines the themes of all his previous works, fusing them into a penetrating study of one man's struggle for survival with dignity in the modern world. The novel is long, intricately structured, and wide-ranging in setting and time-span. But the action is unified in its concentration around the novel's hero, Jake Hersh, who has already made an appearance in Richler's fiction, as a boy in The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz. Richler traces the life of his protagonist from childhood to middle age, culminating in the events that are introduced at the beginning of the book. Throughout the work, Richler keeps us in mind of his intention, expressed in the epigraph taken from Auden's "September 1, 1939":

> Defenceless under the night
> Our world in a stupor lies;
> Yet, dotted everywhere,
> Ironic points of light
> Flash out wherever the Just
> Exchange their messages:
> May I, composed like them
> Of Eros and of dust,
> Beleaguered by the same
> Negation and despair,
> Show an affirming flame.

Jake Hersh, a Canadian expatriate film-director, living in London, is in many ways an amalgam of previous Richler heroes. Like Mortimer Griffin, Jake is beset by many of the fantasies of middle-aged men. Our first view of Jake gives us a storehouse of information on this most interesting and most complete of all Richler's characterizations.

Jake has never quite outgrown the dreams of his childhood. He still imagines himself as a sports hero, striking out Willie Mays, dribbling around Wilt Chamberlain, dekeing out Johnny Bower to show that he can still make the big move. Along with these fantasies, he recalls the youthful idealism that caused him to leave Canada to try to make his name in London. Now he feels some regret at leaving his family, the old ties reasserting themselves as he sees his own children growing up, afraid that they will mock him as he mocked his own parents.

Jake is a loving husband and father, but an insecure one. He fantasizes scenes in which he is cuckolded by his best friend Luke, and others in which he dies of loathsome diseases.

He imagines the reading of his outlandish film script in court, where he is currently being tried on a sex charge. In his film, the Nazis are victorious, and Montgomery is a masochistic slave to Major Mary Poppins, a Jewess with a taste for young Germans. The fantasy

introduces the idea of Jake's Jewish identity, and his hatred of the Germans, which is increasingly emphasized as the book goes on.

Above all, Jake regrets the failure of his career, resenting those who, like Luke, have been more successful than he has. At the age of thirty-seven, there is more than a hint of sour grapes in Jake's attitude towards his fellow man:

> Inside again, Jake made himself a cup of instant coffee. 6:30. Stock-taking time.
>
> It began well, ritualistically well. You have a gorgeous wife. Three kids. You're loved. All the same you've managed to remain an alienated Jew. Modishly ugly. But at thirty-seven you are a disappointment to yourself, a wash-out, and--and--and-- he tried desperately to control the wheel, sensing a catastrophic turn, but he was too late. And he had to admit, looking at things objectively, there were other men in the world who were more talented--no, no, who were rumored to be more talented or taller or richer or better in bed than he was, not that he would be so doltish as to let one of them into the house. Still, you couldn't blinker your wife completely.[1]

Not satisfied with the vision of the respect he will earn by a jail sentence, Jake cannot avoid thinking of the guilt that would accompany his release. Always neurotically aware of being trapped between two extremes,

[1] Richler, St. Urbain's Horseman (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1971), p.17. Subsequent parenthetical references in this chapter will be to this edition.

Jake, like Norman Price, feels the inadequacy of his own generation, branded as trivial, uncommited, irresponsible:

> Young too late, old too soon was, as Jake had come to understand it, the plaintive story of his American generation. Conceived in the depression, but never to taste its bitterness firsthand, they had actually contrived to sail through the Spanish Civil War, World War II, the holocaust, Hiroshima, the Israeli War of Independence, McCarthyism, Korea, and, latterly, Vietnam and the drug culture, with impunity. Always the wrong age. Ever observers, never participants. The whirlwind elsewhere. (87)

In retribution for the ease of his life and the security of his position, Jake visualizes avenging hoards of the hungry and the persecuted descending upon him to demand compensation: "He feared the Red Guards of China and the black fanatics, for he knew they would knock on his door one day and ask Jacob Hersh, husband, father, house owner, investor, sybarite, and film fantasy-spinner, for an accounting" (310).

At the same time, Jake envisions the second coming of the Germans. In his Jewish nightmare, his children are brutally murdered by German "extermination officers". To fight this menace and exact justice upon the remaining Nazi war criminals, Jake dreams up the figure of the Horseman, in the person of his cousin Joey, who in Jake's fantasy, travels the world in search of Doktor Mengele, the chief doctor at Auschwitz, in order to pull the gold

fillings from his teeth. This Jewish avenger, a latter-day Golem, is Jake's predominant fantasy, and the central part of the book consists of a flashback that gives the circumstances of Jake's first meeting with his cousin, and traces the development of the fantasy in Jake's mind.

The account of Jake's early years emphasizes his determination to escape the ghetto environment of his St. Urbain Street upbringing. Like Noah Adler, Jake sees flight as a natural stepping stone to self-realization. Not wanting to be a loser like his father, Issy Hersh, Jake decides that New York will be his Mecca, his "spiritual home":

> America, the real America, was a chance for Jake to see the cream of the Montreal Royals (Duke Snider, Carl Furillo, Jackie Robinson, and Roy Campanella) at Ebbets Field. It was Partisan Review, PM, and the New Republic. It was the liberating knowledge which struck him one day at the university that he was not necessarily a freak. There were others, many more, who read and thought and felt as he did, and these others were mostly in New York. (108)

In grandiose visions of triumph, Jake sees himself impressing Edmund Wilson, knocking out Rocky Marciano in a bar, turning down a chance to direct Lauren Bacall. But these dreams are sharply contrasted with the sordidness of the America that he actually experiences. In the middle of a daydream seduction of an Italian starlet, Jake is removed from the train and sent back to Canada as an

undesirable immigrant. The memories he takes back with him are of suspicious immigration officers, a callous youth, and a psychotic old man with a persecution complex.

On arriving home, Jake finds that it is another J. Hersh, his cousin Joey, who is not wanted in the U.S.A., and from there the story unfolds. Joey, eleven years older than Jake, is the son of Hanna and Baruch, the black sheep of the Hersh family. He disappeared in his teens, and his eventual return is the sole object of his mother's existence. Armed with a tattered photograph of Joey, Hanna haunts the train stations and airports asking strangers for information about her son.

Her daughter Jenny is, like Jake, a dreamer and an intellectual, in constant conflict with the family. Jenny sees herself "not as just another yenta, but as a delectable olive-skinned Jewess waiting for some behemoth of a Thomas Wolfe to pluck her off suffocating St. Urbain and set her down in a Manhattan penthouse, a voluptuary, where she would become, she once confided to Jake, his raison d'être" (139). As it happens, her dream is never quite realized; she marries a second-rate radio playwright in Toronto, and becomes the mistress of an older, but still conniving, Duddy Kravitz.

When Joey finally does show up, he is driving a flashy red MG sportscar, the like of which has never been seen on dirty St. Urbain Street. Although he surrounds himself with

expensive clothes and women, there is something low about Joey; he is menacing when drunk, for example, and his violent temper disrupts the neighbourhood. But Jake and his friends are quick to take advantage of Joey's presence to protect them from the French-Canadians, and Jake especially idolizes his handsome, self-confident, much-travelled cousin. In young Jake's mind, "the MG could have been a magnificent stallion and Cousin Joey a knight returned from a foreign crusade" (129). And therein lies the seed of the Horseman fantasy. But Joey stirs up trouble, and racial tension mounts on St. Urbain to the extent that reprisals against the Jews are taken up to the time of Joey's departure. His car is found overturned and burnt out, but there is no sign of his body, and for Jake the legend of Joey's invincibility begins.

But soon a new dream emerges for Jake and his friend Luke Scott: success in London, a dream which like all others in the novel is bitterly disappointed. Jake and Luke accept the same mythical view of London examined in A Choice of Enemies, that of a city brimming with culture, vivacity, literary tradition, and beautiful women, and they are as disillusioned as Sally MacPherson or Miss Ryerson of Cocksure. Their disillusionment is further complicated by the national inferiority complex they bring with them. Wherever they go, they find themselves apologizing for their nationality, ashamed to be Canadian:

> Jake, Luke, and others of their generation were reared to believe in the cultural thinness of their own blood. Anemia was their heritage. As certain homosexuals pander to others by telling the most vicious anti-queer jokes, so Jake, so Luke, shielded themselves from ridicule by anticipating with derisive tales of their own. Their only certitude was that all indigenous cultural standards they had been raised on were a shared joke. No national reputation could be bandied abroad without apology. (195)

A constant theme in Richler's work, the Canadian identity, or lack of it, is important to an understanding of Jake Hersh, for combined with his Jewishness, it gives him two burdens to bear, two chains to bind him, insisting on his inability to succeed. For Jake and Luke, nothing Canadian can be quite good enough, so that when Luke gets his play accepted for production, he hesitates to ask Jake to direct it. Instead he wants "Somebody real, somebody British" (196). And even though Jake is somewhat resentful and disappointed, he is at the same time relieved, for it absolves him of the duty to do a Canadian play as his first effort, feeling that only a British play would constitute a serious debut. Luke's success only reinforces Jake's growing sense of inferiority and depression.

Jake finally makes it into television, but unable to cooperate with the leading actors and writers, he finds himself spending all his time with the losers and the

stagehands. Achieving small successes here and there, Jake is bothered by the ease of his entry into the film-making community; the absence of struggle detracts from the glory of making it: "He would have been happiest had the capital's standards not been so readily attainable and that it were still possible for him to have icons" (302). Jake needs to have an impossible dream, some fantasy to prick his imagination that is in no danger of coming true, and disappointing him in the nature of its realization. And so he turns to the Horseman:

> The less satisfaction his work gave him, even as he drifted on the crest of the television plateau, having done everything he could there and beginning to repeat himself, the more he began to talk about his cousin Joey, speculating about his whereabouts, wondering what he was really like, oddly convinced that somehow Joey had answers for him. (229-30)

Hearing that Joey has a wife in Israel, Jake sets out ostensibly to view locations for a film but actually in search of the Horseman. Jake's pilgrimage takes him eventually to Germany, but everywhere he goes he finds cracks in the idol. Joey proves to be a rabble-rouser, a card sharp, a smuggler, an alcoholic and an <u>agent provocateur</u>, stirring up trouble between the Jews and the Arabs. But increasingly fired by hate, Jake takes the Horseman as his moral arbiter, his judge, his God. Reflecting

on the Nazi atrocities, he comes to a bitter conclusion: "If God weren't dead, it would be necessary to hang Him" (272).

Returning to London, Jake meets Ruthy Flam, another of Joey's dupes, who demands compensation for the money Joey has swindled from her. It is through Ruthy that Jake meets his tormentor Harry Stein, an embittered little man with a prison record who gets his kicks slashing the paint on Rolls Royces, and making Jake's life miserable with nightly phone calls demanding Ruthy's money.

An accountant and part-time pornographic photographer, Harry has all of the aspirations for greatness, but none of the attributes. Spending his days fixing the expense accounts of the wealthy, Harry is tantalized by the flouting of money and sex, neither of which can ever be his. We are forced to sympathize with Harry in his predicament[2]: "'I'm not getting enough of anything, don't you see? And most of the things I want I'm already too old to enjoy'" (375).

It is partly to assuage his guilt feelings that Jake allows himself to be bullied by Harry. He is a willing victim, sympathetic to Harry's plight, and keenly interested in Harry's accounts of his deeds, so unlike anything Jake

[2] In Donald Cameron's Conversations with Canadian Novelists, Part II, p.117, Richler says that "something almost nobody has grasped is that running through all my novels, I think, there has been a persistent attempt to make a case for the ostensibly unsympathetic man." As examples, he cites Ernst, Duddy, Mortimer and Harry Stein.

has ever dared to do. Having never suffered in the war, Jake derives a certain fascination from the knowledge of Harry's suffering:

> While Jake, in Montreal, learned Stuka recognition from chewing gum cards and thrilled to hear, on Carry On, Canada, that when Churchill returned to his post as First Lord of the Admiralty, out to the Fleet went the signal, "Winston is back," Harry, in Stepney, looked up to see the sky aflame and plunged into the throng rattling the gates to Liverpool Street tube station, where he was to bunk down almost every night of the blits. (23)

At about the same time as Harry appears, Issy Hersh dies, and Jake returns to Montreal for the funeral. He is seized by nostalgia for his old home and family, and feels that despite their crudity and lack of sophistication, there is a feeling of order and contentment in their world, that cannot be reconciled with his idea of the Horseman. Jake is not willing to listen to Uncle Abe's side of the story, but from what we already know of Joey, it seems the most plausible:

> "From what I know of your cousin, if he is actually searching for Mengele, which I don't believe for a minute, if he is hunting this Nazi down and finds him," Uncle Abe shouted, pounding the table, "he won't kill him, he'll blackmail him." (411)

Returning to London, Jake finds that Harry has used his house for an orgy, and the girl he has raped brings

charges against both of them. We have now come back full circle to the situation at the outset of the book. What has been achieved in well over four hundred pages of flashbacks and interior monologue, is a consummate portrait of a man, his dreams, his disappointments, his good points and his bad. Our sympathies are with Jake, for as the victim of society's indifference, and the inevitable crushing of his ideals, Jake still dares to dream, but secretly now, wary of ridicule. It seems almost anti-climactic, perhaps intentionally so, that Jake is acquitted in court, and that he learns of Joey's death. For we know first of all that Jake is basically a good man:

> What Jake stood for would not fire the countryside: decency, tolerance, honor. With E.M. Forster, he wearily offered two cheers for democracy. After George Orwell, he was for a closer look at anybody's panacea. (308)

And we know that he has moved from advocate to acolyte to the assumption of the role of Horseman himself. This is one fantasy that will not die, although it must change its form. Aware of deception on the grand scale, and the ever-present illusions of the public face, Richler nevertheless asserts the desirability of dreams for the individual man. Aware of what he is, and what he can be, Jake is more of a man because he dreams of overstepping the bounds of his mortality, of being the Horseman.

As Warren Tallman says, "Richler is on man's side,"[3] but it is not Swift that he resembles in this work, as Tallman claims; it is Joyce, who in Leopold Bloom gives us the most comprehensive picture of a man in the history of English literature. Indeed, Jake is like Bloom in many respects: both are middle-aged liberal Jews, obsessed with death and sex, defenders of the outcast, fantasy-spinners, and imbued with the necessity of perseverance in the face of adversity. Jake, like Bloom, is everyman, not merely in his worries about the Day of Judgment like the medieval Everyman, but in his embodiment of a wide range of human characteristics. As Audrey Thomas points out, Harry Stein is a doppelgänger of Jake,[4] and the Horseman also represents an aspect of Jake's personality. In fact, Jake has a number of selves, and as we see, is always adding new ones. In his book, The Literature of the Second Self, C.F. Keppler shows that the second self "suggests twofoldness without implying duplication."[5] The Horseman is, by Keppler's definition, a second self: "Unlike either its purely objective or its purely subjective side it is not to be met with in everyday

[3] Tallman, "Need for Laughter," p.83.

[4] Audrey Thomas, "An Offwhite Horse," Canadian Literature, No.51 (Winter 1972), p.84.

[5] C.F. Keppler, The Literature of the Second Self (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1972), p.3.

life; it is a creature of the imagination, a particular kind of imaginative product which we call fantasy."[6] Keppler applies his argument persuasively to Saul Bellow's The Victim,[7] a novel which explores a similar relationship to that of Jake and Harry in St. Urbain's Horseman, the interdependence of tormentor and victim. Jake Hersh is both, and in the multiplicity of his identity, he is more than human; he is humanity.

There are some fine comic portraits in St. Urbain's Horseman that, for lack of space, can only be mentioned briefly here: Hanna Hersh, Jake's British lawyer Ormsby-Fletcher, the middle-aged Duddy Kravitz, and the other film-makers of Jake's age who try desperately to cling to their youth, fortifying themselves against the ravages of time with young girl-friends and sportscars. But only Jake transcends mundane dreams, by concentrating his fantasy on an otherworldly ambition, an identification with a creature of his own creation. If this is a retreat from reality, it is a retreat with honour, for Jake has preserved his sanity, his courage, and his integrity in the face of disaster. The Horseman no longer rides out of desperation, but at last goes forth in triumph, if only in Jake's dreams.

6 Keppler, p.10.

7 Ibid., pp.50-55.

CONCLUSION

Throughout his work, Mordecai Richler confronts the basic problems of human existence: the search for the self, the need to succeed, the difficult art of survival. The world of Richler's fiction is a harsh world--demeaning, savage, incomprehensible, depraved. Its inhabitants are alienated, insecure, self-conscious, looking for a way out. "They are like uncertain creatures in a fabulous but confusing zoo, not sure why they are there, not even sure what human forest they once inhabited."[1] Many of them require the security of assumed identities; that is, they live under false pretenses, like Seymour Bone or Ziggy Spicehandler. Many are possessed by feelings of guilt, fear, or oppression, like Mortimer Griffin, Norman Price, or Jake Hersh. All seem unable or unwilling at first to confront the reality of the world around them. They retreat into worlds of fantasy, worlds in which they are all-powerful, avengers like Jake or Hy Rosen, successful like Charlie Lawson or Norman Price, secure like Sally MacPherson or Miriam Hall, respected teachers like Theo Hall or Mr. MacPherson in Duddy Kravitz, somebodies like Atuk or Duddy himself. Many of these dreams overlap, certainly in the

[1] Warren Tallman, "Wolf in the Snow," p.46.

cases of Jake Hersh and Norman Price. All are handicapped to some extent by their dependence on fantasy and dreams of wish-fulfillment, or in their subjection to guilt and fear.

It has been shown above, convincingly I hope, that Richler is always quick to emphasize the impossibility of wish-fulfillment, that the actual outcome is seldom like the dream. He returns to this idea again and again in his constant reiteration of character and setting: the disappointment of Europe in the eyes of the Canadian expatriates, the shallowness of the film-makers' world, the disaster of love outside marriage, the impossibility of escape. The same unscrupulous businessmen, cheating husbands, frustrated wives, idealistic youths, and middle-aged failures parade their shattered dreams through the pages of his work. David Sheps's description of Richler's heroes is to the point: "They urgently need to succeed and are haunted by the fear of failure; they alternate between delusions of triumph and a suicidal sense of utter emptiness."[2]

Yet Richler is not a pessimistic writer. He is, as he maintains, a moralist, convinced that the world is absurd, but that man has the capabilities within him to survive the ravages of his environment. Thus, he presents heroes

[2] Sheps, Introduction to Mordecai Richler, p.xi.

like Mortimer, Norman, and Jake who do persevere, who cling to the old values, and uphold the humanity of the species. And he has a great deal of sympathy for many of the minor characters in his novels, people like Barney Larkin, Melech Adler, Max Kravitz, and Harry Stein. In defining the role of the novelist, Richler has said:

> Too often, I think, it is we who are the fumblers, the misfits, but unmistakably lovable, intellectual heroes of our very own fictions, triumphant in our vengeful imaginations as we never were in actuality. Only a few contemporaries, say Brian Moore, live up to what I once took to be the novelist's primary moral responsibility, which is to be the loser's advocate.[3]

We know what Richler means here when he speaks of losers; but in fact all of his own creations are losers to some extent. Their fantasies are crushed, their ideals ground to dust, and yet they continue to live with a measure of decency and respect for morality. Those who cannot choose, like André Bennett, are sacrificed. Those who choose wrongly, like Duddy Kravitz, are perhaps beyond redemption. But those who stand for honour and decency, like Jake Hersh, will survive. Reality may have frustrated their youthful ideals, and their middle age may be one of fear and regret, but in the final analysis, there is too much

[3] Richler, "A Sense of the Ridiculous," Shovelling Trouble, pp.32-33.

to be thankful for to give up the fight. That is why the "Horseman" curls up in bed with his arms around his wife, why Noah takes the scroll from his grandfather, why Norman decides to marry Vivian, why Duddy embraces his father. Even in death, for Mortimer, André, and Atuk, there is some consolation. As Chaim says at the end of The Acrobats: "'There is always hope.'"

But Richler never lets us forget the tension between reality and fantasy. He knows that human experience seems to show the futility of dreams, but that man will ever continue to reach for what is beyond his grasp, realizing as he does that his effort is probably doomed. But this self-awareness, indicative of reason and understanding, is a key to man's existence. And with this understanding comes an acceptance of the self that does not preclude the chance to dream, to hope, to wish for better things. Therein lies the tension in Richler's view of man.

Richler is not unlike Saul Bellow in his approach to man, and their themes are often similar. "Throughout Herzog and Augie March we find the ironic contrast, not always comic by any means, between the ideal of greatness people set for themselves and the reality of foolishness or age or poverty."[4] The comparison should probably remain

[4] John Jacob Clayton, Saul Bellow: In Defense of Man (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), p.56.

superficial; Richler is not the great writer that Bellow is. However, I think we can say of Richler, as J.J. Clayton says of Bellow, that he "rejects the denigration of the ordinary life of the individual and tries to show in his fiction the possibilities for finding meaning in such lives. In all his novels the defense of human dignity and human possibilities, even in a dehumanized age, stands central."[5]

[5] Clayton, p.24.

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