Chapter II

The Spectrums of Religiosity

The use of mythical patterns, divine presences, the discovery of underlying structures of ritual origin and the assimilation of specific literary works are some of the narrative strategies adopted by the modern writer to portray a new dimension or level of meaning in a particular work of art. Biblical texts and rabbinic sources are used by Jewish Canadian authors to explore important aspects of life like birth, death, old age and marriage. The different interpretations of the Bible, Torah and Talmud open up multiple meanings. The inherent myths in these sacred texts point beyond the specific facts of history. Eternal patterns and recurring motifs are evoked to animate the events in the historical period.

A Biblical story takes on meaning from its historical context. By decoding the story within that context, the meaning of the myth in its particularity is grasped. Myths need have no single meaning. Placed within different contexts the same stories may convey different messages. In the same way a set of diverse stories from a single historical context may reveal a single meaning. Reading traditional texts allows readers to find layers of meaning hidden
behind it. It also encourages attention to the others, the outsiders who shadow the text even while they are excluded from it. The narrative form of myth opens the way to new views of reality and to new understandings of life.

The stories in Jewish texts are mythical. The scholar Gersham Scholem, often credited with founding the modern study of Jewish mysticism, also understands Jewish stories as myths that point to ever-new meanings hidden beneath literal words. He states that when myths and stories function as narrative, “a definite stage in the development of religion” is reached (7).

The Torah forms the foundation of Jewish life. It encompassed all aspects of life and left nothing untouched. The Torah cannot be comprehended without an understanding of the halakhah. The halakhah—“the path wherein Israel walks”—formed the main part of the oral tradition and encompassed all aspects of the Jew’s personal and communal conduct. It included the order of ritual and prayer, tithes and offerings and other commandments, laws of purity and impurity, Sabbath and festivals, marital relations and personal status and civil and criminal law. It was the oral tradition that, in effect, converted the Bible into the Torah—the doctrine that informed and reflected every aspect of the way of life and the aspirations of the Jews.
The Synagogue is the foremost institution of Judaism. In establishing the synagogue, Judaism created one of the greatest revolutions in the history of religion and society, for the synagogue was an entirely new environment for divine service, of a type unknown anywhere before, and it did not entail the ceremonial restrictions and financial sacrifices that were required for the maintenance of temples. The synagogue became the centre of religious and social life among the Jews. The synagogue was the instrument that kept Jewish tradition and the Jewish faith alive and that made them accessible to the rank and file of the Jewish people. Its function extended to many areas: it was a house of Torah study and of prayer, as well as a focus of social and cultural life.

As a young boy, Mordecai Richler had to study the Torah because of religious compulsions. But he soon became disinterested and disillusioned with conventional organization of Jewish religion, for that matter any religion. At the same time he had a solid base of the theoretical, theological, mythical and mystical aspects of the Bible as well as the Torah. Judaeo-Christian parallels shape the contours of Richler's protagonists and plots. Richler's experimentation with Biblical contexts attests to an artistic search for strategies to articulate an overwhelming historical
reality. An infinite series of near-identification obscures the outlines of the characters in his novel. The personality dissolves behind the mask that hides it. At the same time, Richler is also capable of a highly original mythification of daily life in his use of non-traditional symbols and images. Modern mythification is based on universal symbolization and expresses the levelling, impersonality and alienation in modern society. Wide use of a variety of motifs is at the very heart of modern mythification as is the constant duplication of characters drawn from the most diverse mythological, literary and historical sources.

_The Acrobats_ (1954) is greatly influenced by the ideas and modes of thought, fashionable during the 1950s. The novel describes various characters lost in search of themselves in Spain, while all around them a thematically significant festival unfolds, which recalls Hemingway’s _The Sun Also Rises_ (1926). The few ineffectual anarchists, communists and social revolutionaries who console themselves by looking back to the glorious but failed campaign against fascism remind one of _For Whom the Bell Tolls_ (1940). The hero in _Acrobats_, a young artist, is wounded, in typical Hemingway fashion. The wound manifests itself psychologically in recurrent violent headaches. Much of the dialogue of _The Acrobats_ is in the sparse style of Hemingway. Moreover, some of the
phrases are almost lifted directly from the American author. André, for example, at one point proclaims how words like “courage, soul, beautiful, honour” and others, especially “love,” have become “almost obscene” (121-2). Frederick Henry in A Farewell to Arms (1929) utters almost the same words in a similar fashion.

Apart from Hemingway, The Acrobats is sub-texted by one more source—Malcolm Lowry’s masterpiece Under the Volcano (1965). Richler borrows Lowry’s festival framework, tranquil epilogue and the drunken, guilt-ridden, dying protagonist. Lowry’s festival is the Day of the Dead, celebrated in Mexico on 1 November, with elaborate religious observances. On that day, the dead are believed to return, though only for a day. Lowry’s story begins with a sad, quiet prologue in which two friends mourn the death of Geoffrey Firmin, known as “the Consul” and his wife Yvonne, who had died at the same time exactly a year before. The rest of the book takes us back to the last day of Geoffrey and Yvonne’s lives as we watch them play out their fate. The Consul is a self-destructive yet endearing protagonist who drinks to drown out his anguish and guilt over the incineration of German sailors who were prisoners of the ship he commanded during the Second World War.
Geoffrey Firmin, former British Consul to Mexico, who longs only for his next drink is, unbeknown to himself, on the last day of his life. As the story opens, Geoffrey is already a chronic alcoholic, too far degenerated to respond sexually or emotionally to his wife who suddenly, inexplicably, returns to him after the agony of their divorce. Fleeing from his concerned wife and equally concerned half-brother, the Consul staggers from one cantina to another, going deeper and deeper into the woods. Finally, in the last cantina, he allows a prostitute to sell him her favours; after which he is shot by the fascist police. His dying body is flung into the Barranca, a deep volcanic chasm that splits the area in half. At the moment of his death, lightning flashes in the sky, filling the air with radiance. His wife, who follows him through the forest, sees the radiance even as she falls under the hooves of a white horse that her husband—moments before his death—had set free.

The significance of setting of both the prologue and the rest of the book on the Day of the Dead, one year apart, is that the dead do return to play out their last day for the reader. In context of the story, the prologue is really an epilogue, as the friends mourn the anniversary of a tragic death.

In *The Acrobats*, Richler's sensitive hero spends his last days in an alcoholic haze, still trying to wash down the guilt of
having given his girlfriend money to abort his child. He wanders from bar to bar, until in a drunken, migrainous hallucinated haze, he allows a prostitute to take him to her room. There, too drunk and confused to have sex, he showers her naked body with the bank notes given to him by Chaim to start a new life. After stumbling out of her room, André is accosted by Kraus who had been following him. The two men have a verbal war and then a physical encounter. André is seriously wounded and Kraus heaves him over the bridge railing so that he smashes on the rocks below. As André lies dying, the last giant falla fills the sky with radiance which Toni watches happily back in town, not knowing that it signals her lover’s death. At the end of André’s life, “suddenly, his fists digging into the mud he pulled himself upward. He thought he was screaming but his voice was small. ‘No. Just a bit—yet.’ Then he fell backwards his face in the mud” (177).

In Under the Volcano, the Consul at his death “suddenly . . . screamed, and it was as though this scream were being tossed from one tree to another, as its echoes returned, then, as though the trees themselves were crowding nearer, huddled together, closing over him in pity” (Lowry 376).

The Acrobats begins on the day of St. Joseph, a holiday celebrating the earthly father of Jesus, the patron saint of fathers
and carpenters. In Spain, this festival is celebrated a whole week with singing, dancing, drinking and making giant figures of wood with fire crackers inside. These figures are called ‘fallas’ and are exploded on the final day in a frenzy. As one of the characters proclaim: “Perhaps in all of us there is some evil and we are just too weak to burn it. So we build evil toys and dance around them, later we burn them. Hoping perhaps that it will help” (146). The fallas are not evil toys. They are no more evil than the original scapegoat, the “azazel” which ancient Israelites sent out to the wilderness, symbolically laden with the world’s sins. The original scapegoat comes from Levictus: 16:26 where “the Lord spoke to Moses” in the following words:

And he shall take the two goats, and present them before the Lord . . .

And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats; the lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat.

And Aaron shall bring the goat upon which the Lord’s lot fell and offer him for a sin offering.
But the goat on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat, shall be presented alive before the Lord, to make an
atonement with him, and to let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness.

Then shall he kill the goat of the sin offering, that is for the people . . .

Then Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness. (Levictus 16: 7-10; 15-21)

By the time of the New Testament, these two sin offerings—one to be burned and one to be sent into the wilderness alive—become one: the Lamb of God who died for the sins of the world. In themselves, the fallas are as innocent as the Son of God who offered himself in sacrifice for the world, and as innocent as André Bennet who dies when the last falla explodes in the sky, on the holy day of St. Joseph.

Though André Bennett seems an unlikely candidate for martyrdom, allusions to his symbolic role are scattered throughout the novel. In addition to his ambiguous status as his father's son, he is taken under the wings of a Spanish couple Pepe and Maria—Spanish names for Joseph and Mary. His friends include thieves,
prostitutes and social outcasts. Toni says of him, "he wants to bleed for everybody" (36). He dies on a day dedicated to the expiation of sins. After his death, his clothes are divided among the tramps who watched him die. While Jesus died to bring life to the sin-filled world, André runs into death because he feels heavy with sin himself. While Jesus raised a man named Lazarus from the dead, André is almost seduced by the wife of a man who changed his name from Laz to Larkin. As Christ was resurrected in the body, so André achieves a kind of resurrection in the child that bears his name.

In the light of Richler's sub-texting his novel with Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* as well as the story of Christ, the death is entirely valid and meaningful. Richler confides to Gotlieb that he was convinced that André's death grows out of the plot and that it functions as "a symbol in itself" (Letter to Gottlieb 16 Feb 1954). It completes the identification with Lowry's tragic hero whose death, though dingy, was a form of atonement for his sins. They fulfill the promise of *Dia de San José* in which effigies are laden with the people's sins and then set ablaze for the public good. And they reveal André as a parodied Christ figure whose death sets Toni free to marry a more suitable, less neurotic man.
The Acrobats, however, is not just the story of André. As George Bowering has pointed out:

We watch not the performance of one man's life, but the tumbling pattern of the human condition. Each player hides his own version of guilt, secret from the rest. The recent past in each case haunts the present and promises no good future—for any of the characters of the novel, for Spain, for the mid-century world. (11)

We see the human pattern in miniature in several different ways in the novel. Several subsidiary characters embody different versions of the same theme basic to André and his story. As significant as any of the background characters are the fallas, the huge wooden and papier-mâché caricature figures that are part of the festival at Valencia. It is no accident that André's death occurs concomitantly with the minor apocalypse of the flaming and exploding fallas.

Son of a Smaller Hero (1955) retells the story of Noah and the Flood. Richler sub-texts his particular tale with a biblical story with a larger purpose than the title of this novel would lead one to presume. He is named after the biblical Noah whom God saved from the Flood when the rest of the mankind, heavy with sin and
corruption, was condemned to drown. So Noah Adler has not only a personal fate, but a religious destiny to fulfill as well. The biblical Noah was a “just man and perfect in his generations and Noah walked with God” (Genesis 6: 9). Noah Adler walked with Melech, his grandfather, until he was eleven years old, at which time he discovered Melech cheating a customer in his scrap yard. Noah could not walk with Melech after that. Even as a child, Noah Adler had an innate moral sense different from those around him, which is what “a just man and perfect in his generations” seems to imply. Rabbinic commentary in *Pentateuch and Haftoras* indicates that the phrase may be interpreted either as “unspotted and untainted by corruption” or that “by the low standard of his age, Noah was righteous; but had he lived in the age of Abraham, he would not have been conspicuous for goodness” (Hertz 26). Richler’s Noah is unspotted and untainted by corruption but he does not—or thinks he does not—believe in God.

The biblical Noah, after the Flood and the re-population of the earth, was discovered drunk and naked in his tent by his youngest son, who ran to tell his brothers (Genesis 9: 20-1). The Rabbinic commentary in Noah’s drunkenness is as follows: “Scripture shows in this narrative what shame and evil through drunkenness befell even a man like Noah who was otherwise
found righteous and blameless before God” (Hertz 34). However, some commentators argue that as the first to cultivate vines, Noah was ignorant of the intoxicating effect of its fruit. The elder brothers, out of filial piety, walk backwards into the tent so as not to see their father’s nakedness and cover him with a blanket. Noah Adler also has the opportunity to see his father both spiritually and physically naked when his father dies in the scrap yard fire. He drinks whiskey to keep up his courage:

Noah stared at the body, Wolf was huddled up and held an iron box to his stomach. A charred wooden beam was pressed against his back. His face was distorted . . . . The clothes were burned but his body was intact . . . . Noah turned away but his path was blocked by stretcher bearers. (137-8)

Noah jumped into the pit where his father lay buried, hoping to save the body from being mutilated by a crane that was clearing the earth away. By the time his father is brought to public view, he is decently covered. By protecting his father from the crane, Noah is engaged in an act of filial piety. In that sense, he emulates the two older brothers in the biblical story. By being the first to find his father, he is also the first to find the iron box which Wolf clutches to his chest and that box becomes Noah’s salvation.
In The Bible, Noah was saved directly by God’s command, because he alone was “righteous.” But in the Adler family, righteousness is defined and enforced by Melech whose moral standards do not match his piety in religious observance. Therefore Noah Adler deliberately and openly makes his choice. He will keep the moral law in so far as he can but he will break the ritual laws which define him as an orthodox Jew. Melech is sure that Noah will be punished: “Each man creates God in his own image. Melech’s God who was stern, sometimes just, and always without mercy, would reward him and punish the boy. Melech could count on that” (201).

Melech rules over his family, which he considers his kingdom, with an iron hand. In his youth he abandons his beloved Helga and their child, later tyrannizes his family and cheats his customers. In the light of all this, he cannot be regarded as an honest and upright person. Therefore he is not someone whose opinion the reader can trust when it comes to Noah. Furthermore, Noah pays him respect, which he probably does not deserve, in an indirect way when he asks for one of Melech’s Torah scrolls to take to Europe (The Torah contains the first five books of the Bible at one time ascribed to Moses and called the Five Books of Moses or the Book of Law). By giving him the Torah, Melech—ironically and
inadvertently—establishes a covenant with Noah analogous to the one established between God and the Biblical Noah after the Flood. By giving his grandson the Torah scroll, Melech wordlessly acknowledges that the young man is worthy of the blessing that the Law confers: that he is still a son of the Torah even though he may not follow Melech in all his ways. “You have given me what I wanted” (200), Noah said.

In the degraded miniature world where Noah lives, some of the Biblical values are still intact. For all his faults, Noah is a better man than those around him. He refuses a ten-dollar tip that an inebriated passenger in his cab tries to thrust on him, even though it would have paid for a week’s rent. He offers to marry Miriam although his passion and love have cooled off because he is horrified at the thought of discarding “used” people. If he left her, his family would be triumphant. They would gloat that an alliance between a Gentile and a Jew was doomed from the start. On the other hand, he wasn’t going to marry Miriam to spite the Adlers. He did not want to hurt her, but neither did he wish to marry her for the sake of pity. “What do I say now? He thought. What do you do with used people? Send them to the laundry like soiled shirts?” (125). Noah offers respect and friendship to his grandfather when the old man tries to shut the door on him. Noah wants his cousin
Harvey to know that his being a homosexual did not horrify him. So far, Noah remains a man "righteous in his generations" like his biblical namesake.

At the end of Richler's novel, Noah has his boat ticket in his pocket and is free to sail away. The biblical Noah had got sanction—indeed he had God's express command—to save himself while the rest of his world drowned. He was chosen to be saved from the Flood so that a new race of men might be born, a race that could be better than the old. Richer's Noah is a descendant of the generations that began after the Flood, and he sees emptiness, untruth and despair both in his own community and in the Gentile community epitomized by Miriam and Theo Hall.

In the biblical Noah story, "There were giants in the earth in those days . . . when the sons of God came into the daughters of men, and they bear children to them" (Genesis 6: 4). In Richler's Noah story, the protagonist is not born to giants, or mighty "sons of God," but to a smaller hero, a man whose moment of heroism results from his wistful desire to be a somebody in the eyes of his scornful wife and mocking family. The heritage he leaves his son is mixed: the "cashbox" he thinks he is rescuing gives his son Torah scrolls, and the knowledge that his grandfather's religious intolerance came from having long ago sacrificed his hopes of
happiness and love. However, his name—Noah—gives that son a sense of special destiny which could to some extent justify the ruthlessness necessary to save himself when the rest of the world drowns.

*A Choice of Enemies* (1957) is a sad story leavened with liberal doses of Wilde humour. Norman Price is not the conventional tragic hero, but merely a ‘normal’ man who pays the price for his mistakes. The novel assumes the form of a Greek tragedy with the arrival of Ernst Haupt—whose name appears to be Richler’s pun on Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Ernest* (1895)—in German, Ernst means “seriousness, gravity, earnestness” while Hauptsächlich means “primary”, the ‘sach’ part meaning “thing or matter.” Ernst Haupt therefore can be roughly and wittily taken to mean “the primacy of earnestness”.

By unwittingly killing Norman’s brother and taking the woman Norman plans to make his wife, Ernst plays a parody of *Oedipus Rex* in London. And he plays an even wilder parody in Canada after fleeing from Norman’s wrath. In Canada, chance offers him the opportunity to save an old Jew from the falling wall of a building being demolished. He almost loses his own life in the process. Buried and nearly dead beneath the rubble, Ernst is finally happy, for, some kind of balance has been restored to his life. Then,
although a hero to the “League for Jewish Gentile Friendship,” he is claimed by Frau Kramer, a middle-aged German widow, old enough to be his mother and whom he vehemently disliked. In traction in hospital, Ernst suffers her kisses and her public proclamation that he is her fiancé. Though he dislikes her, he is afraid of her. He is using her dead husband’s identification papers that he purchased from her. So Ernst goes reluctantly into a bleak marriage. It is a grim vision, subtly and effectively sustained by Richler.

The thematic likeness of *A Choice of Enemies* with Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) calls for a more detailed analysis. Even a casual reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reveals that it was not enemies but rather a good friend who corrupted the young man and set him on the road to ruin. Specifically, it was the seductive carpe diem philosophy of his friend and patron Lord Henry Wotton, that made Dorian Gray believe that so long as he was young and beautiful he could do no wrong:

> ‘We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to struggle broods in the mind and poisons us . . . . The only way to get rid of a temptation is to
yield to it. Resist it and your soul grows sick with longing. . . .’ (Wilde 29)

Ah! Realize your youth while you have it. Don’t squander the gold of your days . . . . Youth! There is nothing in the world but youth! (Wilde 35)

Dorian Gray followed his friend’s advice by yielding to every temptation, no matter how dreadful, squandering his youth in corruption and debauchery with the result that he died, a soul-sick ugly man. On the other hand, Richler’s protagonist, already past the joys and vulnerabilities of youth when the book begins, would have benefited from Lord Wotton’s advice to “seize the day.” “Each man lived his own life and paid his own price for living it. The only pity was one had to pay so often for a single fault. One had to pay over and over again indeed. In her dealings with man, Destiny never closed her accounts” (Wilde 216). Norman Price’s surname echoes this passage in Dorian Gray, so does the story of his life. For Norman pays a heavy price for his faults, not once but “over and over again” before the novel comes to an end. Dorian Gray’s character flaw was an innate amorality that easily accepted Lord Wotton’s advice to seize every moment and do as he pleased. Norman’s flaw is of a different kind. On the whole, he is a gentle kind man, morally upright and honourable in all his
deals. Indeed, his goodness causes problems for other people who feel diminished beside him. “You don’t like Norman,” Karp says to Graves, “because he has dignity” (CE 30). “Norman is dangerous,” Ernst says to Sally. “I’ve had dealings with his kind before. They are the first to crack up. They are . . . ’ ‘Good?’ asks Sally. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘How I hate a good man’” (88). “Norman is a fool. A principled, cold-hearted fool . . . he is too good for us” (106-7).

Richler borrows the theme and protagonist of Budd Schulberg’s What Makes Sammy Run? (1941) for The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz (1959). Richler here plays a game with his readers where the sources set up ironic echoes in his own work and is fully intended to be noticed. He uses well-known works which he expects the reader to recognize. To show his indebtedness to Schulberg, Richler tags Duddy by having one of his enemies hail him with the words: “Well, look who’s here, Sammy Glick” (168). Duddy’s name calls our attention to the Biblical David. His victory over the local gangster, Boy Wonder, who has become a legend in his own lifetime, is seemingly impossible. With his success in toppling the ‘mythical’ hero, Duddy becomes a ‘giant killer.’ And by the courage, ingenuity and
perseverance with which he fights for his land, Duddy wins the right to be compared with his famous Biblical namesake.

In Schulberg’s novel, Kit had called the hidden beach “Glick’s lagoon” both as an ironic tribute to Sammy Glick’s ambition and as a descriptive statement about a place where one could be alone and be truly oneself. In *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, the Edenic mountain lake provides a center for Duddy’s ambitious frenzy: a ‘nobody’ suddenly sees the opportunity to become ‘somebody’ and falls from grace in the process. From the moment he sees the lake and the surrounding land as destined to belong to him, Duddy’s fate is sealed. From then on, he uses everyone—friend, family and foe—to feed his ambition and succeeds. He believes that he will be as lucky as Sammy Glick; only those who kick everyone else out of the way get to the top and such ones are always alone.

Schulberg traced Sammy’s diseased ambition to his failed father Max who could not support the family properly, and who preferred his elder son—the budding Rabbi—to his younger son, the entrepreneur. Richler portrays Duddy as coming from a home where the mother is dead and a studious brother. Richler closes Duddy’s apprenticeship with a dubious victory. Duddy makes his appearance, though briefly, again in *St. Urbain’s Horseman* (1971).
Here Duddy is seen only through the eyes of Jake Hersh, as Sammy is seen through the eyes of Al Manheim. Like Sammy in *What Makes Sammy Run*, Duddy in *St. Urbain’s Horseman* makes his appearance as a millionaire locked in a disappointing marriage. Duddy's marriage, while not as shattering as Sammy’s is equally disappointing. Duddy had hoped for “something nifty yet *haimeshe* in a wife”: someone who would clean up the “smelly socks and soiled shirts strewn everywhere” in his apartment; who would cook “chicken soup, flanken and knishes for her husband” (*SUH* 169-70). What Duddy gets is the “plump, bejewelled Marlene Tyler,” small-time actress and show girl whose idea of dinner at home is a TV dinner defrosted in the oven.

In the Christian aspect the horseman has taken on the sins of the world by becoming a sinner himself. In his Jewish manifestation, he brings Nazi criminals to justice and exhorts his fellow Jews to fight back against their tormentors. The horseman is a parodic version of Hercules by virtue of his parentage, his strength, his womanizing, his enormous appetite for alcohol, his death and his status as a God.

Joey’s father was named Baruch that means ‘blessed.’ The opening phrase of the Hebrew ritual prayers is “Blessed are thou O Lord . . .” Hercules’ father was Zeus, king of the Gods. Hercules
was celebrated for his strength, frequently symbolised by a giant club in his hand. Joey defended the boys of St. Urbain Street with a baseball bat. Joey had several wives and many girlfriends, often at the same time. He was notorious for his womanizing and was careless about his wives. One of Hercules’ tasks was to steal the golden apples from the garden of the Hesperides; one of the horseman’s missions is to steal the gold fillings out of Mengele’s mouth. Joey died in a burning plane, but Jake—after his initial mourning, continued to believe that he still lived somewhere. Hercules died on a flaming pyre after which he ascended to the heavens to become a constellation, the charioteer with four horses. As Hercules becomes a charioteer in the sky, the horseman is a shining star in Jake’s constellation of heroes.

After the horseman is reported dead, Jake says that may be he is Aaron. Perhaps Jake believes that if Aaron could become the high priest of Israel, so he himself might yet become an honoured spokesman for his people. While Moses ascended the mountain to commune with the almighty, the weak and faithless among the people persuaded his brother to fashion them a graven image to go before them in the Wilderness. When Jake sees himself as Aaron, he sees himself with self-reproach, as one who erected a false God. Aaron had been destined by the Lord for a special
purpose. Aaron the artificer, once he had purged himself of his error, was to become the high priest, the first Rabbi.

And it shall be upon Aaron to minister: and his sound shall be heard when he goeth in unto the holy place before the Lord, and when he cometh that he did not die. (Exodus xxviii: 35-40)

Like Aaron before him, Jake had fallen into the trap of the artist: discontented with reality, he attempted to fabricate something better and was naïve enough to believe in what he had made.

Jake's name assumes a further significance if we take his full name Jacob, which associates him with the biblical Jacob, the third Patriarch of Israel. The biblical Jacob, younger son of Isaac, wrested a blessing from his old blind father by subterfuge and guile. In the well-known story, he dressed himself in the hairy skins of goats to approximate the hairy face and hands of his elder brother Esau for whom the patriarchal blessing was intended. Isaac thought he recognized Esau and gave Jacob the patriarchal blessing instead (Genesis 27:1-29).

In St. Urbain's Horseman, Jake visits his father Issy (Isaac) who is dying of cancer. He tries desperately and in vain to make
contact with his father to elicit some sign of recognition and love from him:

[But the old man] stared at him with large vacant eyes . . . his eyes turned inward, he did not smile . . .

[Jake] could bring no spark to his father's eyes . . . .

Only when Jake pretends that he knows ‘Jackie Gleason . . . personally’ does he gain his father's attention. For one brief moment, "he basks in his father's awe. (273-4)

For one brief moment Jacob Hersh felt blessed.

In *Joshua Then and Now* (1980), Joshua Shapiro combines features of Jake, Joey and Stein of *St. Urbain's Horseman*. Joshua is Jake roused to combat, returning to his ancestral home and sweeping intruders out, making the place clean and safe for his family. He dreams of revenging himself on an ex-Nazi, as Jake's horseman was supposed to be tracking down Dr. Mengele. Like Stein, Joshua indulges in wanton acts of mischief directly against individuals whose bourgeois complacency he despises. In Joshua, Richler has patterned his story on a biblical precedent, but within that framework, random incidents, accidents, collisions and disasters are deliberately chosen so that they form a sensible pattern.
In The Bible, Joshua succeeded Moses as the leader of the Israelites. Using his great skill as a warrior, he conquered Canaan and gave his people the land that God had promised them. Richler’s Joshua is the contemporary urban Jew, fighting to establish himself in a world largely dominated by the Gentiles, particularly the world of Montreal’s wealthy Westmount district. The biblical Joshua made the son and the moon stand still and the walls of Jericho fall down because his battles were sanctioned, and directed by God. However, in Richler’s novel, Joshua Shapiro is already a casualty when the story begins:

Look at me now, Joshua thought. His right leg was no longer suspended by pulleys from a hospital ceiling, but it was held in a cast, multiple fractures healing slowly at his age... Yet he continued to brood about all the blood they had pumped into him. Twelve alien pints. It flooded his dreams. It polluted his waking hours. The odds were that some of the blood had been peddled to the hospital by junkies. I am bound to come down with hepatitis, he thought. Worse, may be. (1)

In The Bible, Joshua divided the land of Canaan among the twelve tribes of Israel and Reuben was the leader of the first tribe.
In Richler’s novel Joshua—whose father’s name is Reuben—broods over twelve alien pints of blood that have been pumped into his veins. And as he slowly recovers, his father and father-in-law shield him from photographers and newspapermen anxious for a glimpse of the fallen hero. Joshua, though unbowed, is extensively bloodied: his body broken, his marriage in shreds and his reputation in tatters. But miraculously, the worst is already over on the opening page itself and Joshua is cautiously on his way back to recovery. The bulk of the novel is concerned with Joshua.

Somewhere in the background of the novel is the mighty shadow of Joshua, the biblical warrior, who as successor to Moses led the Israelites step by fighting step into the Promised Land. Joshua Shapiro has the same fighting spirit as the biblical Joshua and the same indomitable faith in the code of ethics. But unlike the Mosaic law brought down from Mount Sinai, the fighting Shapiros’ code can be pithily summarized: “don’t take money from a woman and don’t take . . . from anyone” (254, 133). Joshua Shapiro knocks out the Lake Memphremagog country club set, the Montreal Westmount crowd and the Montreal police force (represented by Detective Sergeant Stuart Donald McMaster), all of whom stand in his way and follow a looser moral code than father Reuben’s eight commandments “listen here, . . . there are
ten commandments. Right? Well, it's like an exam. I mean you get eight out of ten, you're just about top of the class, aren't you?" (69).

Joshua's fighting spirit is honed by his father's precept and example and nourished by his love. Joshua suffers because his mother is alarmingly promiscuous. Beautiful, sexy Esther Shapiro bears an honoured biblical name. "The Book of Esther" tells the story of Esther, a young Jewish woman during the reign of Persian king Ahasuerus. The king selects the attractive Esther as his queen. Haman, the wicked prime minister persuades the king to issue an order condemning all Jews to death. With the advice of her guardian Mordecai, Esther convinces Ahasuerus to issue another order to stop Haman from murdering the Persian Jews. The king was so enchanted by the great beauty of Esther that he not only had Haman hanged for his wickedness but also gave Mordecai permission to destroy thousands of Persians instead. When Reuben narrates this story to his son, it assumes grimly ironic dimensions:

So Haman went out and got the king's permission not only to hang Mordecai, but to kill every Hebe in Persia and all provinces. Okay. Sure. What he doesn't know was that Mordecai had his uncle's looker of a
daughter planted inside . . . and he got Esther. . . and one, two, three, the tables are reversed. Not only is Haman hanging on the gallows he set up for Mordecai, but the king now turns around and grants the right to the Jews, quote, to destroy, to slay, and to perish, all the power of the people and province that would assault them, both little ones and women, and to take the spoil of them for—prey, unquote . . . Mordecai and his followers they kill 75,000 enemies, men, women and children, which is why we celebrate Purim quote a day of feasting and gladness, unquote. (290)

The word “Purim” probably comes from the Hebrew word “Pur” meaning “lot.” Haman had used lots to determine the day of execution of the Jews. Purim is celebrated in February or March on the 14th day of the Hebrew month of Adar. It commemorates the rescue of the Jews of Persia from a plot to kill them.

Reuben’s retelling of the Purim story casts a shadow on Mordecai, on Esther and the Jews who celebrate the slaughter of “75,000 men, women and children” with “feasting and gladness.” According to his interpretation—prefaced by the statement that Mordecai was a real conniver, a very blood-thirsty fella . . . and
certainly the first Jew pimp” (288). “The Book of Esther” shares with “The Book of Joshua,” a celebration of indiscriminate slaughter. When Joshua fought the battle of Jericho and led the Israelites into the Promised Land, his armies put to the sword every man, woman and child at God’s express command. “And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old and ox and sheep and ass, with the edge of the sword” (Joshua 6: 21). This glorious battle, calls in question the morality of Joshua and his mighty men of war, to say nothing of the God in whose name they fought. Therefore when Richler’s Joshua goes to war against his enemies and goes to the ludicrous extremes of over-kill, it might be seen as an ironic comment on the proud name he bears.

While Richler is questioning the sanctity of biblical names and deeds, he also makes us wonder about Mordecai, the guy who is supposed to be honoured at Purim. David L. Jeffrey suggests: “The Book of Esther is not really so much about Esther as it is about Mordecai. Mordecai, as Reuben sees him . . . is an operator who manipulates his protégé and the king’s lust into a contract for his own advantage” (127).

When Richler shows us Mordecai in the Purim story as a blood-thirsty conman and pimp, he draws our attention to the
ambiguous nature of his own name. Moreover, when he named the mother of Joshua as “Esther,” Richler’s own mother could hardly have been pleased. Richler’s Esther, beautiful and seductive, slides from temptress of little boys to fan dancer at a night club, to stripper to porno film actress, to owner of a massage parlour. Meanwhile, her son’s feelings change from admiration and love to a weary long suffering compassion. But even as he wages war on mothers, Richler elevates Joshua’s father (semi-literate boxer, small-time hood, bootlegger and bank robber) to keeper of the keys to his redemption.

Reuben Shapiro, Richler’s father who was an irrepressible Jewish smalltime gangster and ex-prize fighter emerges as the most admirable character in *Joshua Then and Now*. He bears a close resemblance to the rogues of Isaac Babel’s *Odessa Tales* or *The Mottke Thieves* of Sholom Asch’s Warsaw underworld, whose vulgar physicality and bold defiance of the law shocked the fastidious Jews and Gentiles alike. A pariah, unashamed of his outcast state, Reuben is nonetheless a patriarch who functions as his son’s religious instructor and sexual advisor. Richler captures the comic incongruity of the hoodlum-turned biblical commentator in Reuben’s foul-mouthed travesty of the Purim story:
Mordecai is a guy we’re supposed to honour on Purim. But the way I see it . . . he was a real conniver. . . . he entered Esther in the contest . . . . Esther took the crown . . . and old Mordecai, really leaning on his connections, now ends up prime minister in Haman’s palace . . . now . . . the way I see it there are two morals buried in the story. One, Mordecai’s rise out of nowhere proves something I’ve always tried to knock into your head. It doesn’t matter what you know, but who you know. Two, we are not supposed to tie the knot with a goy or a shiksa. But nowhere in the Book of Esther do you find God hollering because she married a goy, and I never heard any Rabbi complain either. So if I interpret the law correctly, you are not allowed to marry out of faith unless it’s into a royal family. Interesting, eh? (339-44)

Assuming with Aristotle that tragedy deals with those better than ourselves and comedy with those inferior to us, one could easily conclude that Reuben Shapiro is indeed a vulgarian straight out of low comedy. Though his remarks lack the sprightliness of mind and subtle delicacy found in the more intellectual characters, his Purim interpretations reveals a street-wise savviness of times
past and present. Through his bastardization of the *Bible*, Reuben provides us with more legitimate truths about the disparity between religious precepts and secular practices than moralists and professional preachers. Reuben's unbuttoned candour, his schoolboy irreverence, his gutter literalness are in a way a direct antithesis of upright conservatives. His is a gleeful expression of profanity to mock the faithful and taint the squeamish. Uncovering the venal within the venerable, it expresses the earthly fallibility of the seemingly virtuous.

The fictionalizing of facts, the biblical sub-texts and a suffering guilt-ridden protagonist are the key elements of Mordecai Richler's *Solomon Gursky was Here* (1990). Though Richler does not acknowledge it, Montreal's Bronfman family is the inspiration for his saga and the prime victims of his satire. Robert Fulford remarks:

Bernard Gursky aka Mr. Bernard is angry. ‘I don’t get ulcers,’ he rages, ‘I give them.’ Funny, Sam Bronfman, aka. Mr. Sam, used to say exactly the same thing. But don’t jump to the conclusion that Gursky, the Jewish bootlegger who founded McTavish Distilleries in Mordecai Richler’s new novel, is a thinly veiled version
of Bronfman, the Jewish bootlegger who founded Sea
Gram's. (12+)

But both the publisher's note at the front of Solomon Gursky was
Here and the author's note at the back insist otherwise. Of course
sceptics will note that Mr. Bernard, like Mr. Sam, launched his
empire in the 1920s with a string of prairie hotels, exploited
loopholes to sell booze inter-provincially and then smuggled the
contraband into the U.S. Both tycoons, having succeeded with the
help of brothers, fought with them and kept their sons out of the
line of succession. But Mr. Sam never had a brother like Solomon
Gursky, "whose mysterious presence haunts this book" (Fulford
12+). True, Sam Bronfman did not have a brother called Solomon,
but he did have brothers—Abe, Harry and Allan—out of whose
best qualities, together with some good traits from Sam himself,
Solomon Gursky was fashioned. What Richler appears to have
done with his Montreal-insider's knowledge of the Bronfmans, and
a large amount of additional research, is to create a fictional
product out of known facts. "Richler makes up some stories about
his version of Bronfman (his crimes, his sex habits, etc.) but
otherwise he seems to be in thrall of the public image of the man
we all know about" (Fulford 12+).
In keeping with his covenantal stature, Moses Berger is named after the biblical Moses, who brought down the Tablets of the Law from Mount Sinai, and who wrote the history of his people in the first five books of the Bible. As the biblical Moses described the rise of the house of Israel, so Moses Berger writes about the rise of another mighty house, the House of Gursky. And as the ancient story of the Israelites is intertwined with the history of nations other than itself, the Gursky saga spans continents and generations, finally becoming an integral part of the history of Canada where the Gursky empire is built. The Gursky characters act out diminished or debased versions of the biblical history from which they spring. In this regard, no story is more debased than the history of brutish Isaac Gursky, son of Henry, grandson of Solomon, and co-inheritor of the Gursky empire when the novel ends.

Abraham, the first Patriarch of Israel is called upon by God to sacrifice his only child, Isaac, the beloved son of his old age—to prove his faith. He takes his son to the top of Mount Moriah, prepares to kill him, binds him down, and lifts his knife when an angel calls his attention to a ram caught in the thicket, and tells him to sacrifice that instead. Abraham thankfully does as he is told, and he and Isaac return home, together. In Richler's novel, the story of
Abraham and Isaac assumes a sinister twist. Isaac Gursky lives with his father Henry and Nialie, his Inuit mother by the shores of the Beaufort Sea. Henry, moved to the Arctic to resume ties with the abandoned Northern tribes. As part of his Inuit brethren's religious care, Henry brings in special food for the Passover and journeys far into the north to deliver his sleigh-borne kosher food. On one of these journeys, Henry is cannibalised by his son.

On the morning of their departure, “A gleeful Henry roused Isaac out of bed early. ‘Wake up, wake up, to do the work of the Creator!’” (524). [This is in keeping with the biblical source where “Abraham rose up early in the morning . . . and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son” (Genesis 22:3)]. Henry takes Isaac and one other young man, and the three set off for the far North. However, only the resourceful Isaac survives the trip: Henry dies of a broken neck, the young Inuit, Johnny starves to death and Isaac is finally rescued, having survived by devouring his father’s thighs. Richler’s satiric reversal and parody of Abraham and Isaac myth shows to what depths the Gursky clan descends in its fourth generation. In Christian mythology, Jesus shared his last supper with his disciples:

... as they were eating, Jesus took bread and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, and said;
Take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, and
gave thanks and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all
of it; For this is my blood. (Mathew 26:28)

Unblessed by the mystery of Christian faith, this symbolic eating
and drinking of blood becomes cannibalism.

Mordecai Richler’s affinity for Biblical and Jewish stories and
myths can be traced to the contradictions of his personality. He is a
believer and non-believer at the same time. To many non-Jews
and most Quebecois, Richler was seen as a representative Jew.
He was familiar with Jewish myths and religion which was built on
the foundation set in his traditional pre-bar mitzvah days. But
conservative Jews accused how in his personal life, he managed
to distance himself from things Jewish even while he wrestled with
Jewish demons in his writings. The rituals and rhythms of Jewish
life were largely absent from the Richler household. He retained
only a few Jewish practices such as the Passover Seder. When his
five adult children gathered at his Quebec home, Richler and his
wife celebrated the traditional meal and drinking of wine. “We do it
in a very nonreligious way, but following the rituals. It’s a very
moving ceremony. It’s the Exodus story of Jews escaping slavery.
And I like the old songs. I can still sing some of them to my
children” (Todd 20).
Despite disavowals, Richler was profoundly Jewish. Yet, above all else he was a writer. The Jewish writer and intellectual has been perceived by the world as the archetypal modern outsider, constantly reminding himself of his dual alliance to his realm of residence and his tribal place in the diaspora. Thronsten Veblen observed that "it is by loss of allegiance, or at best by force of a divided allegiance to the people of his origin that he (the Jew) finds himself in the vanguard of modern inquiry" (38). For Richler, the struggle of a divided allegiance is the driving force of his fiction. Ever between cultural camps, it is no surprise that Richler has been at the leading edge of such sensibilities as the loss of faith and alienation of the self in an urban milieu. He explores not only the ethnic dimensions of these issues, but also the spiritual prices Jews were just beginning to pay to become Canadians. Richler employs the ancient stories of the Biblical and Jewish tradition, the key elements of Western culture, and the very modern resources of Jewish nationalism to create his world of imagination.


---. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. New York: Scribner’s, 1940.


---. Solomon Gursky was Here. Toronto: Harmondsworth, 1990.


