Chapter V

Many Faces of Truth: History as Interpretation

Apart from the themes and motifs that form the buttress of a literary work, its application sets apart the writer from those with literary-inclinations. The reach and versatility of the creative talent depends not just on the detection and selection of material suitable for literary exposition, but on the life infused to it by the author. Though Mordecai Richler chooses the persecution of Jews as his central theme, his depiction transcends such narrow constraints touching upon universal themes that pertain to humanity at large.

As the incubator of many thematic and stylistic aspects of the later novels, *The Acrobats* is a fascinating apprenticeship work. Though the novel has a fair number of characters and incidents, narrative progression and action are minimal and are generally conscripted to explore the protagonist's inner experiences. The main narrative takes up over first half of the novel. The other half introduces several minor characters and insubstantial minor plots. These incidents and characters only marginally complicate and advance the action of the novel. They are more significant to Richler’s evocation of the Spanish ethos and to his study of his tormented protagonist. Richler structures his narrative in such a
way that the reader’s curiosity is ignited and suspense sustained. He weaves the different episodes together by compressing the action into three days and by narrating André’s earlier experiences concurrently through flashbacks and retrospections—a technique more ambitiously pursued in *St. Urbain’s Horseman* and *Joshua Then and Now*.

The organization of the narrative is of prime importance in the effective projection of the theme concerned. Be it conventional or beyond norms, a firm framework holds the narrative together to lend it coherence and significance. But the dexterity of the author consists in constructing a supporting structure that sustains, lends it power and variety yet not impeding readability.

The structure of *The Acrobat* anticipates the dialectic progression of some of the later novels. Richler alternates and juxtaposes various episodes to serve his study of antithetical ideologies and values rather than to achieve linear progression. For instance, juxtaposed episodes contrast the fascist Kraus with the humane André, the materialist Barney’s visit to a brothel with André’s warm relationship to Toni, and the active communist guerilla, Guillermo, with Derek, the impotent and disillusioned communist veteran.
Richler conveys the nature of André’s perplexity with the contemporary political situation quite directly in frequent and extended discursive comments—a method that Richler later viewed unfavorably: “I think that for an idea to be artistically valid, it should never be stated but should always be implied through a character” (Letter to Robert Gottlieb 16 Feb 1954). Richler’s account of André’s relationship with the various residents of Valencia reveals his early talent for constructing dramatic scenes and for conveying characterization by distinctness of speech. On occasion, however, as George Bowering observes, Richler’s dialogue becomes too mannered and too self-conscious (13).

Most of the instances of contrived conversation are generally the consequence of Richler’s powerful political comments on his characters. In this scene for instance, where Pepe is comforting his ailing, pregnant wife, the thematic requirement of the novel forces itself into their conversation:

“Why did he die, Maria? What did it mean?”

“I don’t know.” . . .

“It is not enough to say that he died for a cause. Nobody dies for a cause. They die for their woman and their family. And he wanted to live for them,” Pepe said.
She said nothing. . . .

“Maybe he died for you?” . . . .

“For me?”

“So that, you might understand something.”

“What?”

“I don’t know.” (26-7)

Richler attempts to use the characters’ solemnity to suggest profundity of feelings and thoughts. The passage falters under the weight of tragic meaning that it is supposed to carry and emphasizes how little has been said. Overly contrived and often derivative, *The Acrobats* forcibly expresses an angst that was fashionable in the fifties but which lacked the courage of its own convictions.

Noah in *Son of A Smaller Hero* flies from the conventional restraints of narrowly defined religious and social structures. Reviewing his depressing first day of freedom, he reflexively recalls his family and friends. Such moments of recollection given in the form of flashbacks are evidently Richler’s method of introducing the reader to the pre-history of the novel, but, juxtaposed as they are with Noah’s current experiences, they serve also as a recurring structural indicator of his binary feelings and responses. Several flashbacks to Noah’s childhood tell of his appreciation of literature,
of his awakening to beauty and of his traumatic and enlightening experiences with racial prejudices and religious absolutes. Noah’s stressful relationship with his community and his painful search for his self impart to the novel a pervasively sombre mood which is reinforced by the recurring imagery of oppressive heat and bitter cold, of garbage heaps, and particularly of blackness. These images, given early in the first chapter and reinforced again and again in later chapters, create a dismal impression which stays with the reader throughout the novel.

The few pleasant days mentioned in Son of a Smaller Hero serve to emphasize by contrast unhappy experiences. Melech, for instance, is portrayed reading the obituary column on a spring day, and Wolf’s funeral takes place on “a bright morning” (143) in summer. Blackness is emphasized in Melech’s coal yard, in Wolf’s home, in Leah’s dreams, and in bleak streets. Noah himself wanders in the dark night and looks at the dark sky. The metaphorical use of light-dark images is common. Melech and Leah, no longer close to Noah, feel he could have been “the brightness” (19) of their lives and during his brief period of happiness with Miriam, Noah observes that the “darkness around us . . . belong to others” (102).
A Choice of Enemies is an improvement on Richler’s first two novels that were obviously works of author as a young man. He matured markedly with his third novel (Scott 75). However, it is not a work that marks the end of “the apprenticeship of Mordecai Richler” (Stovel vi) primarily because Richler too obviously manipulates narrative and character development.

The issues in A Choice of Enemies are more complicated than the protagonist Norman Price first imagines, and the novel is more than a satire on the reactionary private values of professed public radicals. To achieve this, Richler gives the plot an unlikely twist by testing Norman’s principles more seriously than he intended. Norman is to be seen both in his strength and weaknesses. He is a man of principles and generous in his treatment of others. We should also view the other characters, in the same broad, overall fashion. None of them is a stock figure; all have their own very human mixture of virtues and defects. So just as the possible melodramatic twisting of the plot precludes a simple political satire, so too does the rounded portrayal of the characters keep the novel from descending into melodrama.

The novel seems to be, in part, an existentialist fable and, in part, a realistic novel that verges on social satire which makes it seem in conflict with itself. The two forms do not normally go
together. Existentialist fable emphasizes the fundamental absurdity of life. Satire is posited on the assumption that the absurd is not fundamental but amenable to rational control. Thus the London émigrés all come to a dawning awareness that, as fellow travelers, they had been considerably misled by Stalin. Clearly, there were lessons to be learned.

Charlie, Joey and Norman comprise one triangle in the novel. Sally, Ernst and Norman make up another. The subsidiary triangle balances the major one, a balance that helps to give structure to the book. In each triangle Norman fulfills the role of patron, protector, the good man, and in each he is finally the odd man out. The two triangles also have their differences. With Charlie and Joey, Norman plays his self-defined role comfortably, at no cost to himself. So he plays it comparatively honestly. Joey and Charlie are the characters who slip into occasional bad faith. With Sally and Ernst, just the opposite situation prevails. Norman befriends the two because that friendship allows him to remain close to Sally, whom he more and more (but characteristically too late) decides he loves.

In *The Incomparable Atuk* and *Cocksure* the predominant form of narration is the dramatic. The pervasive, brisk dialogue plainly reflects Richler's parallel involvement at this time with film
and television scripts. Both novels accentuate the story telling technique of suspense, which increasingly becomes a mark of Richler's plotting in his later works. *The Incomparable Atuk* is adroitly plotted and overflowing with zestful caricatures of the fraudulent and the affected drawn from the social and cultural circles of Toronto of the 1950s. Richler utterly disregards the element of probability in formulating the central idea of the novel which tells of the picaresque adventures of Atuk, an Eskimo poet.

*Cocksure* was written at a time when Richler was busy with film and television scripts and this invariably invites analysis in cinematic terms. The pervasive dialogue, at times contributing to the narrative, at others exploding with appealing wit and humor, could so easily have been lifted from a film script. The montage, cuts, and dissolves (seen, for instance, in the transitional fading out and fading-in on Tomasso's thick pebble glasses at the end of Chapter Twelve and beginning of Chapter Thirteen) all contribute to the thriller tempo of the main narrative. The opening scene of *Cocksure* recalls and probably parodies the pre-credit opening of the Bond movies: the camera picks up Tomasso's AC Cobra 427 driving up to a wrought iron gate, follows it past guards, through a cypress-lined driveway, to a swimming pool graced by a bikini-clad nurse. There is a cut to Tomasso approaching a figure in a wheel
chair—the dreaded Star Maker who sends a reluctant Tomasso on a mission to London. There is another cut to Tomasso on a plane to London, and as he picks up Mortimer’s photograph, of which the camera gives a close-up, the credits appear, at the end of which Mortimer’s photographic image fades out and Mortimer himself fades in. *Cocksure* abounds in such parallels to film scripts, and these make the novel perhaps the one most easily adaptable to the screen.

The inclusion of farcical scenes (such as those telling protractedly of Tomasso’s apprehension for his eyes, Rapani and his cohorts pouring over torrid passages from Harold Robbins and Polly’s quirky behaviour) have a tempering effect on the satirical passages with which they are juxtaposed. Richler sees Mortimer as the archetypal little man who, though he may be unsure of himself and may occasionally wonder if the others are right and he is wrong, struggles to be himself and to live by traditional spiritual values in the face of constant persecution.

Though *Cocksure* focuses on the misadventures of a Canadian innocent abroad, it is not primarily concerned with Canadian issues. The novel looks inclusively at the ubiquitous decline of spiritual values and moral responsibility in contemporary society at large. Richler is angered, not amused, by the forces
generating this decline. Consequently the humor here is more militant, the imagery more grotesque and the language more ribald than in *The Incomparable Atuk*.

These narratives are rich in fantastic characters and incidents. George Woodcock, commenting on Richler's plotting, argues that "It is not that the Star Maker and Shalinsky are intrinsically implausible companions, or that the action is unconvincing in satiric terms. It is rather that there is no real fusion of tone between the sticky confusion of Mortimer's private life and the sinister silliness he encounters in the company of the Star Maker. It is as if a character is living in two novels" (1970: 50). According to him the novel progresses along two currents of action—deriving from the Star Maker and from Shalinsky—that never really coalesce and the imagery and themes underline this lack of cohesion because it focuses on the evils of modern life while the Shalinsky level concentrates on follies. Though it is true that one current of action is more grisly and grotesque than the other, Woodcock's conclusion that there is "no real fusion" between the two is not wholly justified.

To begin with, Richler, who is exploring Mortimer's experiences as a professional, as a member of his race, and as a family man, employs at least one other current of action to tell of
Mortimer’s relationship with his wife and Ziggy, on which impinges Mortimer’s involvement with the resourceful chemist, Rapani, with Rachel Coleman, with Miss Ryerson and the Beatrice Webb House, and with Polly Morgan. Most of these episodes could hardly be attached even tenuously to either the Star Maker of the Shalinsky level. The Star Maker narrative is certainly more prominent than the other two; however, it is a prominence achieved through Richler’s use of this narrative (with which Cocksure begins and ends) to give the novel its structural frame, and not through any spatial emphasis since Richler allots equal space to the three spheres of Mortimer’s life.

One aspect of Cocksure’s inclusiveness is its broad depiction of the protagonist, Mortimer Griffin, in three contiguous spheres of activity. Mortimer appears as a man of affairs, as a member of a particular ethnic group, and as a family man. Each sphere has a distinctive narrative strand itself. Richler quite skillfully weaves these various strands together through a common emphasis on grotesque images, extravagant situations, and bizarre characters. Mortimer, who features in every episode in the novel, is himself an important unifying device.

Richler structures St. Urbain’s Horseman around a trial—a trial on a charge of immorality. The novel begins with the trial
underway. It ends with a verdict rendered, several verdicts in fact. But the legal proceeding, as Zailig Pollock notes, “is more than just the climax (and core) of the novel; it provides a central metaphor around which all the issues of the novel are organized” (93). Jake is on trial, and that trial tries his wife, his friends, and the family he thought he left behind in Canada (especially his mother). The trial tries him in another sense too, for it is clearly the objective correlative to and direct consequence of his own middle-age identity crisis. But most of all, Jake must be both the prosecutor and defendant in his own private judicial process. As a Jewish expatriate Canadian, quite out of place in court at Old Bailey, he reviews the past.

By employing a complex structure, Richler succeeds in imparting a tight form to this novel which would have been difficult to achieve with a linear organization. Though the novel remains characteristically episodic, it has a cohesion and density not evident in the preceding novels and, by beginning and ending with a trial, it acquires a structural symmetry. The structure also makes it possible for the reader to see how much an individual’s present is haunted by his past—a theme given more extended consideration in *Joshua Then and Now*—and mirrors the protagonist’s confessional, recapitulating frame of mind, which in turn constitutes
a major unifying factor of the various episodes. And the structure accommodates itself readily to the traditional narrative requirement to which Richler firmly adheres: holding the reader's interest. Within the first few pages which relates events of the present, Richler whips up the reader's curiosity about why Jake's mother has come to visit him, why Nancy has ripped out a newspaper story, why Jake who is no equestrian himself has a saddle and riding crop hidden in the cupboard, and what is the nature of his sordid crime for which he must stand trial at the Old Bailey?

Jake's biography is given additional narrative momentum by his imagined and actual quest for his footloose, adventurous cousin, Joey Hersh, known as the Horseman, and by Jake's trial at the Old Bailey for alleged rape, indecent assault and possession of cannabis. A host of minor plots and a gallery of characters impart to the novel an impression of narrative complexity. The multiple symbolic and allegorical functions of the Horseman, together with the involved narrative, the skilful structural use of flashbacks and the penetrating study of the middle aged protagonist make St. Urbain's Horseman a very richly textured work of art.

In St. Urbain's Horseman, Richler employs the complex and challenging figure of the Horseman to function as a floating symbol with multiple meanings which vary in the different spheres of the
novel. Richler portrays Jake's experiences in four spheres of human activity: the domestic, the social, the ethnical and the professional or artistic. In the domestic and social spheres, the Horseman is an ethical symbol: he is a false god in whom Jake initially puts his trust. In the ethnic sphere, he is, part of Richler's effort to create a myth for the contemporary Jew's experience. In the artistic sphere, the Horseman represents the artist's desire for participation which is constantly in conflict with his inherent role as an observer. This novel could be taken as a continuation of Noah Adler's story, beginning just about where Son of a Smaller Hero leaves off.

Setting serves to root the work in a convincing background. It can vary from the vivid portrayal of external features of a locale to the insightful depiction of the mindset of the prominent characters involved. In both, the efficacy depends on the extent of certainty that the author brings to the description.

One of the strengths of The Acrobats is Richler's powerful evocation of the Spanish setting through his vivid recall of sensuous impressions. He quite effectively conveys André's experience of Valencia's brutal poverty:

In his anxiety to keep moving, not to see, he nearly stumbled over a crippled beggar. Both the man's legs
had been severed at the knees: a filthy cotton material was wound around the stumps . . . Spread out before him in the grime was a weird conglomeration of goods—tobacco, matches, flints, prophylactics, crucifixes and two tattered novels of Zane Grey. A ragged dog was sniffing at the edge of his tiny universe of wares. Quite suddenly the beggar gave him a swift wallop in the ribs with a clenched fist. Then he began to cackle idiotically, yellow spittle trickling down the sides of his mouth . . . André followed the track of the dog as he raced down the street amid a shower of kicks. (29-30)

Richler’s talent for depicting setting graphically and evocatively is evident here. His images are sharp and insistent and persuade us to feel, not just observe, the harsh existence of Valencia’s poor.

The opening section of The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz documents the breaking down of MacPherson, whose life cracks up and has to be institutionalized. The opening scene also sets up important thematic foci for the rest of the novel. First we see that Duddy can be ruthless when challenged. He is quick to take offense and slow to forgive. Secondly, Duddy has a killer instinct. He knows intuitively when to strike at someone’s weakest point. At
the same time, the opening scene also attests to two of Duddy's more admirable attributes. He is not as dumb as he seems. And more importantly, he is passionately, fiercely devoted to his family.

Richler's narrative perspective comes into play early in the novel. The first ten short chapters of Part One show Duddy triumphant within the grubby confines of the classroom, the school yard, and the street. The last four chapters show him to be a dupe and a fool, an uncertain, overeager and naïve school boy trying to survive among older and more sophisticated McGill college students. The very qualities that served Duddy at Fletcher's Field High make him a joke to the McGill set. But Richler, in this section of the novel, does not take satisfaction in providing the protagonist with his just desserts. On the contrary, he shows that Duddy is not as bad as he first seemed to be. The episode at Rubin's serves, in a sense, to elicit our sympathy for the same character whom we were invited to condemn in the first chapters of the novel.

In the first scenes of the novel we see Duddy pushing and bragging his way to such small triumphs as being President of Room 41 at Fletcher's Field High. In the second sequence, he is awed by the rich at the summer resort. He would be like them, but he must finally learn to see them for what they are. The ending of the novel balances on the final downward tilting of the moral scale.
Even Duddy's fall, his worst act, is presented through the polarity of two quite-different perspectives. He would view the not-quite-authentic thousand dollar check as an aberrant means to an end so manifestly just that it must redeem the means. At the worst, in his desperate condition, he has succumbed only to irregular borrowing, for he insists that he will repay Virgil later. Yvette sees the forged signature as the fact that Duddy has now robbed the man he had already crippled.

Thus the overall structure of the novel follows a traditional linear pattern with Duddy's development traced on four distinct parts. The first part recounts Duddy's boyhood and youth and concludes with the firing of his ambition to own land when he accidentally discovers Lac St. Pierre; the second describes how within six months he acquires half the land; in the third and the fourth he realizes his dream. The individual parts, particularly the second, are themselves picaresquely episodic as they follow the boundlessly energetic Duddy from one domestic or business matter to another. There are also several digressive but entertaining set pieces, four of which are set off from the rest of the novel by subheadings: "The March of the Fletcher's Cadets," "Commencement," "The Screening," and "The Crusader." In this episodic structuring of the novel one factor touching on Duddy's
character is perceivable: Richler loosely alternates scenes of Duddy's selflessness in his relationship with his family and of his victimization by others such as Irwin and Dingleman with scenes where his selfishness and callousness are prominent. As the novel progresses, this alternating pattern becomes more evident and encourages a see-sawing, binary response to the young rogue.

*Son of a Smaller Hero* offers the most graphic description of the Montreal Jewish ghetto during the 1940s and 1950s that is to be found in Richler's novels. The author's senses are particularly accurate in this novel when he describes the sights, sounds, and smells of everyday life in homes, streets, parks, shops, taverns and workplaces:

The street reeks of garlic and quarrels and bill collectors. Orange crates stuffed full with garbage and decaying fruit, are piled slipshod in most alleys. Swift children gobble pilfered plums, slower cats prowl the fish market. After the water truck has passed, the odd dead rat can be seen floating down the gutter followed fast by rotten apples, cigar butts, chunks of horse manure, and a terrifying zigzag of flies . . . . After the rains there was always the heat again. The flies returned, the old men retreated to their beds, and all
the missing odours of the heat reappeared with a new intensity. (15-6)

As a rule Richler evokes the familiar environment unobtrusively in dramatic scenes, but so intent is he on re-creating it as accurately as possible that he often resorts to long, incredibly detailed descriptive passages and occasional undisguised authorial discourses on ghetto life. The absorption with authenticity of setting should in no way be construed as an unseemly indulgence in the exotic or as a simple socio-historical interest in Jewish ghetto life. Richler's main consideration in this novel is his sensitive protagonist's complex relationship with his environment, and since this is the world within which and against which he struggles, it is of necessity inclusively portrayed.

In its probing of family relationships and the strained connections between individuals who come from different backgrounds, classes, and traditions and in its assessment of the duty of the individual to the individual as opposed to other conflicting duties, *Son of a Smaller Hero* looks forward to subsequent novels like *A Choice of Enemies* and *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, but even more to the still later works, *St. Urbain's Horseman* and *Joshua Then and Now*. The novel impresses with its brilliant setting, its gallery of honestly
perceived and depicted characters, its richness of absorbing situations and episodes, its intensity of tone, and its remarkably perceptive portrait of a sensitive protagonist striving to know himself.

Though Richler does not include extensive description of setting in *A Choice of Enemies* as he does in *The Acrobats* and *Son of a Smaller Hero*, he captures vividly the sense of place, particularly of the two districts where the émigrés live: Swiss Cottage and Hampstead. The setting is conveyed primarily through the consciousness of the principal characters, Norman, Ernst and Sally, and in doing so Richler effectively evokes their constant sense of being, as Norman says, “aliens” (132) in London. Norman, Ernst and Sally are almost always portrayed standing back and observing rather than becoming part of the London setting.

Time is manipulated with consummate ease by gifted writers to stress the perspectives that they bring forth through their creative endeavours. Chronology, the subversion of its conventional pattern, is of utmost importance as a narrative strategy. Attention of the readers can be drawn to specific points in the action of the narrative by the prudent use of the temporal aspect.
Though the action of the novel *Son of a Smaller Hero* extends just over a year when Noah is twenty years old, the reader is able to observe his development as an artist. The chronological arrangement of Noah’s current experiences which conveys a causal sequence of events and the temporal titles given to the five parts of the novel—Summer 1952, Autumn and Winter 1952, Spring 1953, Summer 1953, and Autumn and Winter 1953, point up to the theme of maturation, as does the conspicuous frequency of phrases marking the passage of years, seasons, and even weeks, days and hours: “On that Sunday morning in the summer of 1952” (17), “Noah . . . looked at his watch. 5.15” (25), “The next morning, Friday” (61), “Those first two weeks” (114). Each chapter gives us the time of the action described. Those times fit together more to emphasize the linear unfolding of the plot than to suggest any cyclical quality that might be implied by the designated seasons, which with the year, serve to label the individual chapters.

A symmetrical arrangement of the first and the last scenes of the novel—a structural component which is organically integrated with the well-defined chronological organization of *Son of a Smaller Hero* further alerts the reader to Noah’s growth. The novel begins and ends with Noah leaving home. Each departure is associated
with a Sunday family gathering and with a meeting of Noah and his grandfather. Both Sunday gatherings are introduced with a similar phrase: “On that Sunday morning in the summer of 1952, as under a stern sun . . .” (17), and “On that first Sunday of the winter of 1954, as under a stern sun . . .” (195). Both meetings of grandfather and grandson begin with the same phrasing—“Noah, who at that moment was parked across the street . . .” (36, 201)—and express sentiments that are worded in the same way: “The Adlers lived in a cage and that cage, with all its faults, had justice and safety and a kind of felicity” (36, 201).

There are significant differences, however, between the initial and concluding scenes. In the first gathering, Melech is a dominant figure; in the last, he is relegated to a corner armchair. Noah’s first meeting with Melech is characterized by violent anger and bitterness; the last meeting concludes on a note of reconciliation. When Noah leaves home in the first part, he is bewildered and lost; in the last chapter, he has a better sense of direction. The symmetrical pattern is evident also in the second, third and fourth parts. The third tells of Wolf’s death and constitutes the climax of the novel. The two preceding parts relates Noah’s attraction to the gentile world of Miriam and Theo though he is still
emotionally tied to his Jewish community; the succeeding parts contrastingly tell of his disenchantment with the gentile society.

A Choice of Enemies has a straightforward, chronological structural frame. Within this, however, Richler often juxtaposes accounts of the antithetical societies to which the principal characters are exposed. Ernst's and Charlie's initial experiences in London and with the Winkleman crowd are placed next to each other in Chapters 4 and 5 of Part 2. And scenes of Norman's relationship with the North American émigrés and with Ernst virtually alternate in the second and third parts.

Scenes from the present are juxtaposed with scenes from the past in St. Urbain's Horseman. As John Moss observes: "Chronology is a convenience for Richler, rather than a major plot device. Flashbacks and forward flow simply allow the author to work in the necessary details" (Moss 156-7). Yet the novel is neither so straightforward nor so simple as this quotation suggests. Those "necessary details" are often loaded details whereby Jake envisions one version of his story while the reader can envision quite a different version.

In organizing this extended and involved narrative, Richler adopts the intricate pattern of flashbacks within flashbacks instead of employing the chronological approach. The current action of the
novel extends just over a few days, beginning on the evening of
the first day of Jake's appearance at Old Bailey and ending a short
while after the third day and final day of the trial. Everything else is
given in flashbacks. The novel is divided into four parts. Part I
relates the incidents of the first evening and of the second day of
the trial, with flashbacks to events in London, including Jake's first
meeting with Nancy, and his more recent introduction to Ruthy and
Harry. The second part is a major flashback to Jake as a young
man planning to leave Canada. After a further flashback to the
Horseman's activities in Montreal and his sudden departure, the
novel reverts to Jake's experiences just before he leaves for
England. Part three oscillates between the immediate past in
London and Jake's earlier experiences on his arrival there. The
final part tells about the trial and its resolution and includes further
flashbacks to the immediate past.

Such a complex pattern of accumulative flashbacks could
perhaps confuse the reader. To safeguard against this, Richler
uses dates frequently and constantly introduces significant
incidents as temporal signposts in the opening paragraphs of most
chapters and parts: "1951 it was and Jake . . . had been studying
at McGill for three years . . . ." (SUH 21); “more than three months
passed before Jake actually stood with Harry in the dock of
Number One Court of the Old Bailey . . .” (427). With these frequent references, Richler skillfully manipulates the time sequence and facilitates the reader’s grasp of the chronology of events.

*Joshua Then and Now* is about making patterns and symmetries out of random incidents, accidents and disasters. The action moves back and forth in time—in an intricate series of flashbacks—which involves work on the part of the reader, who follows Richler attentively as he weaves the tapestry of life. Thus the reader’s task parallels that of Joshua’s, as he tries to make sense out of his “then” so that he can function more appropriately in his “now”. The intricate configuration of flashbacks is rapid and constantly shifts back and forth among several time sequences.

The novel begins with Joshua recuperating from his accident in late spring 1978, then provides a flashback to 1937 when Joshua is six years old. This is followed by a portrait of Joshua just before his accident in early spring 1978. At this point, since Pauline is hospitalized, he finds himself surveying his past, thus occasioning many of the flashbacks. The second chapter continues with an account of Joshua’s experiences as a boy of twelve, advances to 1972, proceeds to early spring 1978, moves back again to 1972, then further back to 1963, goes forward to

The events of the novel which are recounted in a series of fragments average about four pages in length. A few are as many as ten pages long, and many are much shorter. Also, the jumps are not merely between the past and the present. They can occur between any periods of time in Joshua’s life, which are recounted. So, on a first reading, the reader has to spend a good deal of effort in working out where each of the episodes fits. Richler, himself aware of the difficulties the time sequence might pose for the reader, facilitates him as he did in St. Urbain’s Horseman with frequent temporal signposts, constantly mentioning hours, days, weeks, years and seasons. He introduces almost every episode or incident with such statements as “only three weeks earlier” (11), “he was eleven, it was autumn, and only two months had passed” (13), “in 1963, the year they had returned to Montreal” (31), “at 1 a.m. on an enchanting spring night . . . 1951 it was” (52). These temporal references make it possible to establish the dates of incidents even when they are not explicitly given.

Critics have pounced on this structure by announcing that this narrative has “the hasty disorder of a collage” (Woodcock 919). Richler however has remarked that he arrived at this structure after
much deliberation. The first version of the novel was organized without chronology, but afraid that the story had just possibly become too confusing for the reader, he attempted to unravel the whole thing:

... I foolishly tried for three or four months to rewrite the novel, setting in chronological order. Then I realized I was ruining it. The mysteries were lost. The real relationship of one time to another was being over-simplified. It just didn't work for me. So I abandoned that and I went back to the layered construction. (Richler, "Interview with Walter Goodman" 22)

The layered structure enabled Richler to avert any likelihood of tedium that could result from a linear chronicling of the experiences of a 47-year-old protagonist. The constant shifting not just among different time sequences but also among different tones, situations and characters impart vibrancy to the novel.

The episodes are not randomly thrown together, but formed by the organizing principle of contrast between past and present, and have a temporal dialectic progression. The best illustration for this principle at work is Part Four, where the to-and-fro movement among the various time sequences accelerates. The first chapter
relates an incident that occurs at the cottage on Lake Memphremagog while Joshua is recuperating from his accident, and the second tells about an experience at twenty-one on the island of Ibiza. Richler unobtrusively makes the reader aware of many parallels and differences between the two occasions. In both, Joshua is being questioned by policemen, but while in the present scene he is an established writer deferentially treated by a Sergeant McMaster, in the Ibiza scene, he frantically and in a futile manner tries to persuade Mariano, the Spanish policeman, that he is not guilty of the charges brought against him by Mueller and the others.

In both time sequences, Joshua has lost someone. However, he is only slightly bothered by the departure of Monique, the girl with whom he has his passionate affair, while he is now deeply perturbed by Pauline's disappearance. Photographs are important in both episodes: the photograph of Joshua kissing Murdoch which really reveals the mature Joshua's compassionate nature, falsely helps to label him a homosexual; the alleged photograph of himself and Monique in the nude is made by Mariano to strengthen the case for Joshua's ejection from Spain. In this Ibiza incident of 1952, Mariano, in response to Joshua's
retort that Mueller has accused him falsely of stealing, says, "Everybody is lying but you" (363).

In the following chapter which narrates Joshua's meeting with Kevin in the winter of 1977, when Kevin is trying to exonerate himself of fraudulence, Joshua makes a similar response to Kevin and is startled by the "echoes" (368)—a frequent aural image in the novel. In the next chapter, set also in the winter of 1977, Joshua attends Murdoch's funeral in London where he meets Murdoch's son Ralph, with whose mother he had an adulterous affair in the 1950s. He is shocked to recognize the parallel between himself and Ed Ryan, with whom Joshua's mother, in the 1940s, had an adulterous affair: "Good grief, he had thought, chilled, I'm his Ed Ryan" (375).

The antithetical arrangement of the various time sequences is not obtrusive, nor is it inflexibly imposed on the novel so as to constrict narrative progression and dramatic effectiveness. Mariano's confrontation of Joshua thus parallels Joshua's confrontation of Kevin, but Richler is equally anxious in narrating the first to evoke an element of intrigue and in relating the second to keep the reader guessing about whether Kevin is in fact guilty or was used as a scapegoat by Trimble. The contrast between Spain then and now is quite evident in Richler's account of the journey
through Spain, but he introduces as well Joshua’s constant feelings of foreboding about Pauline alone in Montreal to heighten the dramatic effect.

There are two kinds of fragmentation which occur in this novel and which has a marked effect on the manner in which the reader perceives it. The first is the way in which the narrative is broken up into remarkably short sections by jumps in time—flashbacks and jumps forward in time, or “analepses” and “prolepses” as Gérard Genette calls them in *Narrative Discourse* (67). The second kind of fragmentation is that caused by the proliferation of characters. Both these devices are related to the poem by W. H. Auden, from which Richler took the epigraph for *Joshua Now and Then*. This poem basically says that love cannot last through time, and so it is important to be able to enjoy the moment while it passes. By fragmenting his novel, Richler seems to imply that the reader should be content to enjoy the episodes as they occur and not worry about a larger significance.

The fragmentation of time is complemented by the fact that the interest in the novel is dispersed among an unusually large number of characters. Richler uses his leaps from one period to another to shift attention simultaneously from one character to another. The reader is continually being asked to meet new
characters and to update his mental file on them. This great abundance of characters and situations has prompted David Lodge to comment that a more parsimonious novelist might have spread these characters and situations over several novels (1056). But many of these characters and situations, as well as the setting, the themes and Joshua's temperament, obsession and relationships recall the earlier novels. Of this uncomfortable feeling of familiarity, one otherwise favourable reviewer says: "It's as if a rich and unusual body of fictional material had become a kind of prison for a writer who is content to repeat himself ever more vehemently and inflexibly" (Edward 25).

It is unusual to have such a large cast of characters as in Joshua Now and Then; what is even more unusual is that we see almost each of these figures over a considerable spread of time, and so each one has the psychological interest of developing in the course of his or her life. The splitting of the reader's interest among thirty or so characters is to look for patterns or casual connections. It is also about fitting the pieces of life together so that they form a pattern which makes sense. If an author concentrates on a few characters, it will be evident early on if there is no significant progression and the work will seem dull. But with a large number of interesting characters to deal with, and a
technique for switching focus from one to another with complete freedom, the lack of growth or development can be obscured, and the danger of boring the reader can be reduced.

Characterization determines the narrative skills of the author. The intricacy of portrayal, the myriad relationships and the vigour of depiction points to the life of the work. The expertise of the writer lies in creating characters, in such number and variety as to support, sustain the narrative and enhance its impact.

The relationship between the major and minor characters in *The Acrobats* is worked out in an elaborate pattern in which nothing is gratuitous and everything is linked by actions or mental associations. The importance of this first novel is that it shows a concern for the structure. In *Shovelling Trouble*, Richler protectively describes *The Acrobats* as his “most vulnerable” book (15). With its frequent energetic use of language and evocation of mood, *The Acrobats* remains a useful means by which to measure the extent of Richler’s progress as an artist.

Richler’s forte, evident in his early novels, is his keen perception of losers like Charlie in *A Choice of Enemies*. Charlie is perhaps the most psychologically credible character. On the periphery of Winkleman’s group, he functions minimally in Richler’s study of Norman’s relationship with the two antithetical sets of
refugees. Charlie betrays Norman and, arriving in London at the same time as Ernst, is tolerated by Winkleman’s coterie because of his political ideology while Ernst is rejected. But Charlie has an existence of his own apart from Richler’s account of political antagonisms, and this is largely responsible for the strength of his characterization. He experiences remorse though typically he takes no action to assuage his pricks of conscience. His redeeming qualities are not mechanically imposed on him. His faults and his virtues are integral and organic parts of his psyche.

It is hard to judge even the most minor of characters, such as Ernst’s father who is only mentioned in passing as wandering from zone to zone seeking something lost—his family and his self-respect. Or we can note how Bob Landis is portrayed early in the novel as the most shallow and insignificant of the expatriates. Though he makes a pass at Norman’s girlfriend Sally, he readily lends Norman his car, so that Norman can conduct his own affair with Sally. The various relationships and narrative strands are elaborately developed and effectively intertwined.

The main narrative of The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz traces the progress of a fledgling entrepreneur from poverty to relative wealth and recognition. This commonplace story is transformed in Richler’s hand into a remarkably lively narrative
through a brilliant evocation of the Montreal setting, a rich gallery of memorable secondary characters, a number of entertaining comic set pieces, fast-paced action which not only carries the plot forward but provides psychological insights into the characters and a scintillating portrait of the protagonist.

Although he can be totally immoral, Duddy is still so vitally, so innocently committed to his own view of his own good that it is hard to condemn him out of hand. Warren Tallman has even found in Duddy a hero of our times, a truly modern man whose frenetic scheming reflects the "accelerated image" that his age demands. Tallman praises Duddy for the honesty of his appetites and for his exuberance (Tallman 63). In contrast, A. R. Bevan sees this same protagonist as a human disaster who, far from achieving any real success, "destroyed himself and . . . those who loved him" (4).

Duddy's treatment of Yvette in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* becomes another touchstone whereby we can judge him during the course of his material rise. In this case he is found wanting. From the beginning, Yvette is no more than a convenience, an object. He shows her as little consideration as Linda showed him. She becomes Duddy's Girl Friday. She cooks for him, types for him and sleeps with him. Soon, as he strives to rise in the world, she functions as an unpaid secretary/manager,
overseeing his tangled business commitments. Yet Yvette is more than another demonstration of Richler's self-confessed propensity to portray women as one-dimensional figures (Gibson 287). Her role is more complex. She is Duddy's accomplice and conscience, muse and foil.

It is curious that although Yvette subtly leads Duddy on, cooperating in the land-acquisition venture, emphasizing his first partial success and pointing out how close he is to final success, she is also shocked by the means he uses. As David Myers observes, Yvette, the "shrewd businesswoman," coexists rather uneasily with Yvette, the "lily-pure conscience constantly chiding the hapless Duddy" (51-2). The point seems to be that Yvette participates in Duddy's vision but does not fully share it.

Many of the characters Atuk meets on his picaresque journey through Toronto's social world are separate episodes in themselves. In addition to many of these episodes, Richler includes many briefer sketches which offer brilliant caricatures of figures like Doc Park, the physical education specialist, who is "world-famous . . . all over Canada" (30), Harry Snipes, a fiercely nationalistic editor, who plagiarizes stories from American magazines, Father McKendrick who proudly "told the rabbi about an enterprising priest in Victoria who had worked out a special deal
with the local shopping plaza, and how he now gave trading stamps in the confession box (127), and Ruthy Bone, a caricature of the more realistically portrayed Jenny of St. Urbain's Horseman, who marries a literary critic instead of a dentist to prove she is not ghetto-bound.

Near the end of Joshua Then and Now, there is a fine interchange of Joshua with Jane Trimble, who has come to visit Joshua to stir up trouble while his wife is in the hospital. She attacks him for being arrogant, she wants to tell her side of the story of her marriage, and wants to needle him with the suggestion that Pauline and her brother Kevin were lovers, she wants to express her despair at growing older and she wants to seduce Joshua. Nostalgia, malice, lust and humour are all blended in a marvelous combination until Joshua throws her out of the house. Richler sketches the possessive power of the past by constructing a parallel between Joshua's obsession with Ibiza and Trimble's with his family background. Though Trimble is Anglo-Canadian, his early life, like Joshua's, was one of poverty and constant struggle. Now financially powerful and married to a socialite, he has carefully concealed his past and created for himself a British upper middle class pedigree.
Trimble denies his Canadian origin when challenged by Joshua. But eventually when Trimble visits Joshua recuperating at Lake Memphremagog, he discloses his hidden past, laying stress on his father's and his own humiliation and degradation at the hands of the rich. Joshua points to the cathartic effect of Trimble's acknowledging his past when he informs Reuben that Trimble "had a stone in his shoe and he took it out himself" (434). Richler deliberately places this brief account of Trimble exorcising his past at the very end of the novel evidently to emphasize what Joshua and Trimble have accomplished by juxtaposing their experiences then and now, and what Pauline, who is shown returning to Joshua immediately after Trimble's confessional account of his upbringing, must do about her wrenching memories of Kevin.

The gentle reconciliation—intentionally presented by Richler through the eyes of Reuben, perhaps the least sentimental character of the novel—is an affirmation of Auden's quiet acceptance of man's suffering and mortality. It emanates organically from Joshua's character and his relationship with Pauline as portrayed throughout the novel. But while this reconciliation is taking place, Joshua's vindictive act of planting stolen money in Seligson's house is unfolding off-stage with the certain ruin of Sergeant McMaster. It is difficult to say categorically
how Richler intends this antithetical characterization of Joshua. Quite likely, he conceives of Joshua as having an inherent duality of character—an aspect of Jake Hersh conveyed through the use of Harry Stein as an alter-ego.

There are indications of Joshua's duality throughout the novel. As a boy, Joshua is both Duddy Kravitz and Noah Adler. He has been to reform school, is prematurely worldly and can be coarse and vulgar. But he also has literary aspirations and develops a social conscience. As a man, Joshua is both Jake Hersh and Harry Stein. Pauline considers him to be so moral that even her father is frightened of Joshua. Yet he equals Harry Stein's capacity for vengeful vandalism. Richler never relates Joshua's acts of vandalism directly or dramatically: there are just hints and insinuations, or reported accounts, such as McMaster's of Joshua's disastrous visit to Seligson's house. Also, Joshua himself never acknowledges responsibility for these vicious deeds. This, taken with the indirect form of narration, allows the possibility that Richler sees Joshua's Steinian acts as originating from the dark side of his psyche, or as Jung would have said, from his shadow.

It is not surprising that the critics differed sharply in their responses to the concluding scenes of *Joshua Then and Now*
which tells of the reunion of the recuperating couple in the garden of their cottage and of their walking back to the cottage with Joshua supported not by his cane but by Pauline. Betty Falkenberg defends the sentimental happy ending: "if the reader thinks back to the Auden epigraph—lay your sleeping head, my love / Human on my faithless arm . . . the quiet acceptance of the last pages seem less sentimental than resigned. It has the dignity of understatement" (25).

The presence of the author is all pervasive which can either be subtle or overbearing. The author's comments on the incidents, people and objects that cannot be worded by the characters of the work are presented through this device. The mastery of the artist lies in the finesse in utilizing such an opportunity.

Son of a Smaller Hero is one of Richler's most simply narrated novels. The major portion of the novel is narrated through the protagonist's consciousness. Noah's consciousness assumes the role of an objective narrator who can resort to omniscience whenever extra information seems appropriate. Richler has some difficulty, however, keeping himself consistently apart from his creation. Though the novel is written in the third person, it often seems to be told from Noah's point of view whether he is in the scene or not. The absence of aesthetic distance between himself
and his protagonist weakens Richler's otherwise perspective study of Noah, for he appears occasionally to share Noah's youthful posturing and his assumption of moral superiority to almost everyone, as in the scene where Noah meets the Goldenbergs at their St. Agatha retreat. This lack of objectivity becomes more readily apparent if *Son of a Smaller Hero* is compared with a later work like *St. Urbain's Horseman*, where Richler succeeds in sustaining an objective appraisal of the protagonist whose experiences quite often parallel his.

The major portion of the novel is narrated through Noah's consciousness, and since most of the adverse comments against the Montreal Jewish society are essentially the response of a troubled protagonist, they tend to be more demonstrative of Noah's character than of any satirical intention on Richler's part. Richler is preoccupied with exploring Noah's mixed feelings, his frustrations, his moodiness, his anxieties and his drunken rages. However, there are scattered scenes occasionally when Richler is speaking directly and omnisciently. The first instance of this authorial voice is found in the set piece on the Montreal Jewish ghetto in the opening chapter. Though the observations in this passage are intended as Noah's, they constitute an authorial discourse punctuated with satirical censure of the self-centred, status-conscious parvenu.
The other instances of authorial voice are found in two crowd scenes. In one, he satirizes the coarse and insensitive figures assembled at the site of recovery of Wolf’s charred body. Commenting on the crowd’s need for melodrama to ease the boredom of their lives on the hot summer day, Noah tells Miriam: “We could charge half a buck a head. But they don’t mean bad” (138). The antithesis in his comment attests to Noah’s efforts to be tolerant of the ghetto people; however the controlling voice here is not Noah’s but the author’s.

The account of the funeral service for Wolf, the other crowd scene, in which Richler experiments with multiple points of view, has several sharp satirical portraits of the lesser mourners, such as the literary hack who “wrote speeches that were read by philanthropic millionaires at Zionist banquets” (143) and the rabbi who “believed in God as an insurance salesman believes in Prudential” (151). The personages satirized in these two crowd scenes have no thematic or narrative function in the novel. They perhaps add somewhat to the authenticity of setting.

Richler achieves an aesthetic distancing from his protagonist in A Choice of Enemies. He stands apart from Norman and appraises him fairly objectively. Though the contrived narrative invites skepticism at certain points about the psychological
credibility of their motivation, most of the characters are not merely mouthpieces of political creeds. However, they still lack the vibrant aliveness of characters in such novels as The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz or St. Urbain’s Horseman. Richler’s constant shifting of focus from the individual human relationships to the political issues is largely responsible for this.

It is possible to identify three fairly distinct authorial foci of narration in Joshua Then and Now: the omniscient, as in the accounts of certain incidents from Joshua’s boyhood; a third-person point of view with emphasis on Joshua as the central intelligence—which is the primary focus of narration; and a third-person point of view where Richler becomes inseparable from Joshua and there is no perceptible authorial mediating presence, as in passages relating Joshua’s sentiments on Ibiza and family life. Despite this occasional oneness of author and protagonist, Richler manages to keep a proper aesthetic distance between himself and Joshua.

Retaining the curiosity until the end of the narrative is a key issue in a narrative, especially in its longer version as a novel. Apart from the effective use of characters to carry the theme forward, the suspense should be preserved to sustain interest in the work. Suspense does not necessarily take on a literal sense as
keeping identities secret, but a broader outlook as to arrange and present ideas with subtlety.

*The Incomparable Atuk* is made engrossing by Richler's adherence to the technique of suspense in structuring the novel. He continually arouses curiosity about what happens next and how the pieces fall into place. From the opening page Richler invites speculation about the nature of the dreadful equipment Twentyman is unloading and does not provide the answer until the last chapter. Other mysteries appear often throughout the novel: what heinous crime did Atuk commit? What is the nature of Panofsky's research which requires him to masquerade as Dr. Zale in the maternity ward of the Protestant Temperance Hospital? What is the game show, 'Stick Out Your Neck' all about? Why was the couple in the park so flustered when Rory Peel turned to look at them? The element of suspense is quite cleverly dealt with and, together with the engaging plot and witty caricatures, makes *The Incomparable Atuk* a very entertaining novel.

In *Cocksure*, having to forego the reader's easy identification with the protagonist, Richler employs the ageless storytelling technique of suspense. The novel is constructed in a straightforward, episodic manner but the episodes are arranged in such a way that the reader is constantly induced to wonder what happens
next and what bearing a particular incident has on another. In the first chapter, for instance, Richler takes hold of the reader with some puzzling and mysterious incidents: who and what are the Star Maker’s spare-parts men, and why does the terrified Tomasso pretend to have difficulty with the eye chart? Why does Tomasso get off scot-free after uttering rash, otherwise unforgivable, profanities to the Star Maker? As the answers to some of these questions gradually unfold, others are progressively added. Why is Mortimer so secretive about his war records? Why does the biography series require the services of the uniformed efficiency team from Frankfurt? These mysteries prompt the reader to go on and give this fast-paced novel added impetus.

In *Joshua Then and Now* Richler effectively creates suspense, of which David Lodge says, “I have seldom seen it used more skillfully” (1056). In *St. Urbain’s Horseman*, Richler invokes the reader’s interest by raising questions in the first chapter about Jake’s present predicament, which are not answered till late in the novel. In *Joshua Then and Now*, a similar structural outline is used and the reader’s curiosity about Joshua’s current plight is engaged from the opening page: Why are a senator and an ex-convict on such good terms and together taking stringent measures to protect
Joshua? Why has Pauline experienced a nervous breakdown and why has she disappeared?

As the novel unfolds, other questions of varying significance to the narrative are raised: Why does Joshua's mother regularly have to take photographs of him? Why are members of the country club so uneasy when Kevin's name is mentioned? Why does Reuben turn pale when Joshua's bar mitzvah is mentioned? Had Richler employed this intricate structure just to achieve a lively and suspenseful narration with no thematic correlation, its use here would have been less easy to justify. However, Richler harnesses the structure to his portrayal of Joshua as a man absorbed with and conscious of the past. In this novel, it is not Joshua's development that is explored, but the contrast between what he was then and what he is now.

Humor is one of the most potent weapons of the marginalised / displaced against persecution and oppression. The lightness of the depiction serves as a façade that conveys core issues besetting whole communities which otherwise face stiff opposition in the popular perception.

George Woodcock feels that "light satire is perhaps the best term to describe this amusing but insubstantial book" (1970: 44). Malcolm Ross argues that the "comedy is as black as it is brilliant."
There is hard, even cruel mockery in Richler's laughter" (x). Richler lets his satire range freely and often enough satire becomes farce. Richler's characterization of Atuk encourages the reader to respond to the novel as a farce. Perhaps had he portrayed Atuk consistently as an *ingénue* whose artless perceptions strip away the pretenses of the Torontonians, the work would have had a stronger satiric tone; but given Atuk's own corrupt nature, when he appears in scenes with members of the civilized society, the reader enjoys the conflict of villain against villain, and does not bother to determine who is in fact the true savage.

Two scenes retain some satirical force mainly because of the particular technique Richler employs in each. The first is Professor Gore's televised annual dinner, where all the cultural and social charlatans of the novel are gathered. This crowd scene, filled with airs and pretensions, is rich with satiric possibilities. Richler presents the scene mainly through the eyes of the television camera and quite effectively employs the cinematic montage to shift rapidly from one affected group to another. Aware of the television cameras, the characters exaggerate their behaviour, thus unwittingly parodying and caricaturing themselves.

*Cocksure* represents Richler's most accomplished writing as a satirist; it is a devastating critique of those aspects of
contemporary society that particularly offend the moral and comic sense of the author. Richler satirizes the Star Maker's vicious, cannibalistic exploitation of his underlings and his callous disregard for human life in achieving commercial success. He also pokes fun at frivolous targets. In long-drawn-out episodes, he shows actors to be nothing more than rubberized robots. The other narrative levels censure vices as well as foibles. Ziggy, who is as irretrievably immoral as the Star Maker, blackmails homosexuals from whom he has extracted love letters and impregnates “French Canadian girls, raising fetus to the age of three months, and then selling them to childless couples in Manhattan” (142).

*Solomon Gursky was Here* is Richler's first novel with a narrative which qualifies as historiographical metafiction. Historiographic metafiction can be regarded as the most prominent expression of the postmodern attack on the traditional view of art as a realistic or mimetic representation of reality (Hutcheon 74). Hutcheon claims that historiographic metafiction... contests the conventionality and unacknowledged ideology of the assumption of a seamless connection between world and art and asks its readers to question the processes by which we represent ourselves and our world to ourselves and to become
aware of the means by which we make sense of and construct order out of experience in our particular culture. (53)

Undoubtedly, literature is itself a response to the cultural climate in which it is produced and thus it inevitably mirrors the established ideologies of its culture.

Richler re-writes Canadian history by countering a version of the past as promoted by Canada's two official "founding" nations, the British and the French. What sparks off Richler's revisionism is a humanist concern and outrage at a dark chapter in Canadian history: the closing of the country's gates to Jewish refugees during the twelve years of Nazi terror in Europe. Jews had traditionally ranged among the least preferred candidates for immigration in Canada. When a deputy minister of immigration turns down Solomon's plea for refugees, this fictional rendering is closely moulded on official Canadian records:

Jews tended to be classified as 'non-preferred immigrants' not because of their race, which prejudice I would find repugnant, but because they consider work in agriculture or mining beneath their dignity . . . . It is because your people are such confirmed city-dwellers, and would usurp positions that could be filled
by the native-born, or immigrants from the Mother Country, that we simply cannot open the flood-gates.

(374)

This passage closely echoes the following historical study:

When in 1928, the deputy minister of immigration, W.J. Egan, ordered that the admission of eastern European immigrants be cut back by two-thirds, he explained that, although the economy was doing well, these ‘non-preferred country immigrants had drifted into non-agricultural work almost immediately upon arrival [. . . .] and [were] filling positions that might have been filled by immigrants from the Mother Country. (Irving and Trooper 5)

The official narrative of Canadian exploration history is sifted through a screen of anti-Semitic prejudice in Solomon Gursky was Here and this makes the official version highly unreliable. It is not only the gentiles, but also the Jews who manipulate the past to suit their purpose. In archives throughout Canada, for example, magazines and newspapers have been cleared of files concerning the less favourable chapters of the Gursky family history (Solomon Gursky was Here 32). Bernard has Solomon “air-brushed” (122) out of old photographs, while a film made on the occasion of his
seventy fifth birthday becomes a montage of selected Gursky history. In general, all accounts of history, whether public or private, are presented as subject to invasion and manipulation, thus drawing attention to the fictive component of historiography. The fact that history is forgeable is underlined by allusions throughout the novel to real events whose official rendering is known or at least suspected to have been manipulated—the death of Marilyn Monroe (62, 76) and Watergate scandal (108, 263, 292, 312).

Ephraim’s arrival in Canada itself is presented as a piece of transgressive historiography. As a result, within the novel’s fictional universe, “the borderline between fact and fiction appears confusingly permeable” (Korte 498). Solomon Gursky Was Here's reader is invited to believe that Ephraim is the illegitimate progeny of an affair between his father Gideon (1773-1828) and an opera singer that brings Gideon’s career as cantor in a Minsk synagogue to end. The Gurskys relocate to Liverpool, and when orphaned at the age of eleven, Ephraim makes his picaresque way to London. During the course of this journey Ephraim learns Latin and penmanship from the paedophilic schoolteacher Mr. Nicholson, a training that enables Ephraim to forge documents. After a brief exotic youth of crime, Ephraim is sentenced to transportation to
Van Diemen’s Land in 1835 on forgery charges. He manages to escape this fate, and he and his companion Izzy Garber set up as bonesetters. In the Orkneys they illicitly join the doomed Franklin expedition in search of the Northwest passage in 1845, with Ephraim as surgeon to HMS *Erebus*.

The blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction becomes particularly pertinent in relation to the core piece of Richler’s revisionist historiography—Franklin’s last journey. Richler artfully manipulates evidence and documents for this purpose. For his readers, the traces of Jewish participation in the Franklin expedition are purely imaginary, but within the novel’s plot and for Richler’s revisionism, it is essential that the presence of Jews in the Franklin expedition is accepted as “fact.” Richler achieves this by a careful manipulation of documents relating to Franklin and the search expeditions sent after him—an ingenious montage of the documentary and the imaginary. Richler dug deeply into the Franklin literature, as he admits in his “Author’s Note.” The fictive evidence of Ephraim and Izzy blends almost imperceptibly with the material quoted from historical accounts, for instance in Richler’s rendering of one of the spectacular findings of Leopold M’Clintock’s search expedition, a life boat converged into a sledge, which contained two skeletons and a curious assemblage of
objects like tea, chocolate, and animal fat. Other than these "the boat was laden with an amazing amount of dead weight. Towels, scented soap, sponge, silver spoons, and forks, twenty-six pieces of plate with Sir John Franklin's crest, and six books . . ." (47). Here, Richler remains basically faithful to M'Clintock's account (M'Clintock 223-4).

It is incredible to see how in this blend of the documentary and the imaginary, some of Richler's apparently fictional inserts turn out to be based on real documents. One of the 19th century Franklin searchers "quoted" by Richler is fictitious: Waldo Logan of Boston, the author of *Life with the Esquimaux: A Narrative of an Arctic Quest in Search of Survivors of Sir John Franklin*, never existed. One would assume then that an Inuit report quoted from this source is also Richler's invention:

We were on King William Island to hunt seals when we met a small party of whites pulling a boat on a sledge. They all looked starved and cold. Except for the young man Tulugaq, and older friend Doktuk, none of them wore furs . . . . We camped together for four days and shared seal with the whites. Tulugaq was short and strongly built with a black beard and was
most concerned about Doktuk who seemed very sick.

(48)

Doktuk refers to Izzy who had posed as assistant surgeon of the Erebus. Tulugaq refers to Ephraim, Tulugaq meaning crow or raven.

However in 1881 Heinrich Klursch, a member of an American search expedition, published his account, All Eskimounter den Eskimos: Eine Schilderung der Erlebruisse der Schwatkaschen Franklin-Aufsuchungs-Expedition in den Jahren 1878-1880, an English translation by William Barr which appeared in 1827 (Overlan to Starvation Cave: With the Inuit in Search of Franklin 1878-1880). It must be assumed that Richler in his careful research did come across this book, which contains the following passage:

. . . we were on King Williams Land to hunt seals . . . and met a party of whites walking south east; they were about ten in number and were pulling a boat on a sledge . . . . They all looked thin, starved, and ill . . . and were not wearing any fur clothing. We camped together for four days and shared a seal with the whites, for which I received a chopping knife as payment . . . The man from whom I got the knife was
called Tuluaq by the others; he was tall and strongly built and had a black beard fleeced with grey . . . while Doktuk (clearly the doctor) was a thick-set man . . . .

(73)

In this instance, the apparently fictional turns out to be factual. This is perhaps the ultimate in the kind of referential confusion so typical of much of historiographical metafiction. As Linda Hutcheon writes in *A Poetics of the Postmodern*:

> Is the referent of historiography, then, the fact or the event, the textualized trace or the experience itself? Postmodernist fiction plays on this question, without ever resolving it. It complicates the issue of reference in two ways, then: in this ontological confusion (text or experience) and in its overdetermination of the entire notion of reference. (153)

Indeterminacy about the referent of historiography is at the core of the dilemma around which the metahistorical argument in *Solomon Gursky was Here* revolves. “Official” Canadian historiography (as far as the novel is concerned) lies about the past—at least regarding Jewish participation in it. But if “all” accounts of history involve invention, selection and construction, how can a “truer” version be told, how can the official
historiographical discourse be countered? This dilemma is most explicitly explored in the figure of Moses Berger, who set out to tell the “true” history of Ephraim and Solomon Gursky. Right from the beginning Moses is presented as a “failed” historiographer. Not only does no one believe the evidence he has dug up, but, more importantly, Moses cannot reconcile himself to the idea that fictionality is “vital” to the task he has set himself—a fictionality which is not necessarily identical with the lies he has encountered in his research. Moses’ creative imagination dried up after his promising career as a writer of short stories was ruined by his envious father, a minor poet. It is only as a revenge for this act that Moses gets interested in Gursky history at all. However, when we first encounter Moses in the novel’s most recent time level of 1983, he is a drunk surrounded by the paraphernalia of his biographical and historical quest: “pages from Solomon Gursky’s journals, tapes made by his brother Bernard, clippings, file cards and notes” (10). Moses has been most careful and resourceful in his research:

Moses was able to establish as much through a close study of the Royal Commission Report on the Liquor Trade, circa 1860-70, and by chasing down every available history of the formative years of the NorthWest Mounted Police. This led him to RCMP
headquarters in Ottawa, where he sweet talked his way into the archives by flaunting his Rhodes scholarship, his first in History at Balliol and pretending that he was searching an essay on Fort Whoop-up for 'History Today'. (144)

However, in the end, Moses has only amassed a mess of evidence about Ephraim, the Franklin expedition and Solomon's engagement in world history. He has not yet translated it into a coherent history, so that Solomon and his ancestor remain elusive to him. The solution for Moses would be to continue with the next step of his job as historian, use his imagination and weave his material into a fictional web. However, Moses dares to do this only where documents fail him, and even then he adheres to the closest documents available: "Trying to reconstruct Ephraim's interminable winters in the high Arctic, the sun sinking below the horizon for four months, Moses had to rely on conjecture and the accounts of other nineteenth century explorers" (432). That greater relic of the imagination could remedy Moses' dilemma is repeatedly indicated. As a researcher Moses more often than not has to do detective work. The only way to re-create history, for Moses would be to restore imagination to the facts. Although Moses believes that Solomon must really be dead, his imagination pictures him in an
image in which Solomon once supposedly left in a plane leading to the remote Canadian North. A plane which finally turns into a raven:

Watching the Gipsy Moth climb, Moses believed that he saw it turn into a big menacing bird the likes of which hadn't been seen over Lake Memphremagog since the record cold spell of 1851. A raven with flapping wings. A raven with an unquenchable itch to meddle and to provoke and to play tricks on the world and its creatures. He watched the bird soar higher and higher. (556)

That Solomon stages his official death in the far North is no accident, for it is here that the Gurskys' Canadian history begins. Solomon's grandfather Ephraim—contrary to official historiography—is the sole survivor of Sir John Franklin's last Arctic expedition. After this successful debut, the Gurskys take part in other key episodes of Canadian history, like the Klondike Gold Rush, the birth of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police or Prairie Settlement. The ending of the novel leads us back to the novel's beginning, where the magic realist aspect is compounded of the events preceding Ephraim Gursky's mythical arrival in southern Quebec in the record cold winter of 1851: "One morning—during
the record cold spell of 1851—a big menacing black bird, the likes of which had never been seen before, soared over the crude mill town of Magog, scooping low . . . again” (3). One indication of the complexity with which the magic realist elements intermingle with the factually realist family chronicle of the Gursky whisky empire may be briefly given here.

In one of his aliases, that of the Reverend Isaac Horn, it can be said to be Ephraim Gursky who actually sows the seeds of the 1934 prosecution. Horn charismatically engineers a fraudulent campaign of disaffected English emigrants in 1901, offering them the Promised Land in Northern Saskatchewan. After a nightmare voyage, the emigrants arrive to discover the ghastly truth of their barren destination. A descriptive sample of the surreal nature of voyage will show how skillfully Richler can control the tone of the magic realist aspect of the narration:

In two weeks at sea, the Reverend Horn, secure in his cabin, was seen below decks only twice. On the fourth day, a miner had his arm broken in a drunken brawl, and it was the Reverend Horn who set the bone and fixed it with a splint. He was seen again after another fight, this one with knives, comes to stitch the men’s wounds. But a certain Mrs. Bishop swore she had
seen him striding up and down the bridge the night of
the gale, the puny ‘Excelsior’ scaling twenty-foot
waves before plunging into a trough, sliding trunks
smashing into walls, splinters flying, the ship’s
fracturing surely imminent. Bare-chested he was,
drunken, howling into the lashing wind and rain. Face­
to-face. I want to see you face-to-face just once. (77)

Among the ship’s emigrants are a hapless couple named Archie
and Nancy Smith. Their son Bert, born in 1903, receives a strictly
fundamentalist upbringing, emerging as a character virtually as
repellent as Bernard Gursky himself. It is Smith’s unrelenting
persistence that finally secures, against the better judgment of
establishment parties with vested interests, the 1934 persecution.

New Age writers like Richler indicate through their novels
that mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather
hides behind it. In other words, magical realism requires “a faculty
for boundary skipping between worlds” (Wilson 1995: 210). The co­
presence of the oddities and the interaction of the bizarre with the
entirely ordinary strikes the mind’s eye. Salman Rushdie writes that
impossible things “happen constantly, and quite plausibly, out in
the open under the midday sun” (302). In this scenario, very
different arrangements of things coexist along with a different set of
possibilities. Magical realism suggests a model of how different geometrics, which inscribes boundaries that fold and refold like quicksilver, can superimpose themselves upon one another (Wilson 1990: 174). The fictional world of magical realism seems to create a translucency through which reality flickers.

The preposterous nature of the narrative becomes evident when we observe the ease, the purely natural way in which abnormal, experientially impossible events take place. It is as if they had always been there; their abnormality normalized from the moment that their magical realist worlds were imagined. The narrative voice bridges the gap between ordinary and bizarre, smoothing the discrepancies, making everything seem normal. At first glance, a fictional narrator appears to know more than Moses, the collector of evidence, at different stages of his research. The gaps in Moses' reconstructive work are filled by this fictional narrator, who provides the flesh for the bones which Moses has unearthed. For example, at the end of Book 6, Chapter I, Moses is puzzled by the fact that Ephraim, as a member of Franklin's expedition, has left traces, but no documentary proof of his presence: "Neither Ephraim Gursky nor Izzy Garber were listed in the Muster Books of the 'Erebus' or 'Terror' (available at Admiralty Records, Public Records Office). But they had been there. Moses
knew, oh yes Ephraim Gursky had been there, and Izzy Garber as well" (414). Moses feels convinced that something very different happened, yet was unable to prove it. Though Moses and the fictional narrator appear to be unrelated, some of the chapters in the novel, detailed by the narrator later turn out to be entries on Solomon's journal, that is, documentary evidence to which, within the novel's fictional universe, only Moses has access. The question thus arises whether the narrator is the creation of Moses who has, at long last, regained the powers of creative imagination. Here, thus the fictional narrator bridges the gap between ordinary and extraordinary and smoothes the discrepancies by making everything seem normal. In this hybrid space, eruptions occur normally and suddenly folds crease the seemingly predictable, textual surface.

In *Solomon Gursky was Here*, the trickery of Solomon increases in the magic realist sections of the narrative posterior to his disappearance from Canada in 1934 and in so doing mirrors that of his grandfather Ephraim prior to the latter's mythical arrival in Quebec in 1851. Moses Berger, the assembler and chronicler of these lives, is magically animated as he performs his discovery of how Ephraim's heritage is passed on through the trickery of his anointed one, Solomon. The myth of Canada, as represented in
the sheer materialism of the Bernard Gursky family, must be discarded so that Moses is capable of apprehending the illusive dimension of Canadian historiography. The myth that Canada is a haven for all races is also to be debunked, as drunkenly expounded to Solomon by Tim Callaghan, a former bootlegging confederate of Solomon:

Let me put it this way. Canada is not so much a country as a holding tank filled with the disgruntled progeny of defeated peoples. French Canadians consumed by self-pity; the descendants of Scots who fled the Duke of Cumberland; Irish the famine; and Jews the Black Hundreds. Then there are the peasants from the Ukraine, Poland, Italy, and Greece, convenient to grow wheat and dig the ore and swing the hammers and run the restaurants, but otherwise to be kept in their place. Most of us one still huddled tight to the border, looking into the candy-store window, scared by the Americans on one side and the bush on the other. And now that we are here, prospering, we do our damn best to exclude more ill-bred newcomers, because they remind us of our own mean origin in the
draper’s shop in Inverness or the shtetl or the bog.

What was I talking about? (367)

Perhaps nothing else in *Solomon Gursky was Here* puts the sense of the here and now so uncompromisingly drably. What the narrative trickery of Moses Berger seems paradoxically seems to have achieved is that the existential selves are upstaged by the historiographies they perform. For those performances have such power that the drab failed myths of the here and now are themselves upstaged and the realism transcends individual experience to cross all kinds of boundaries into a magic domain in which communal past, present and future are united in singular and exciting ways.

Mordecai Richler convincingly argues for the central importance of the narrative in exploring individual and communal identity. The obsession with storytelling is hardly new in Jewish literature. In the Bible and throughout Jewish history, storytelling has served both as the means of bearing witness to the events of the past and also of defining Jewish identity. Through his novels Richler reveals the ironic tensions of comic understatements that characterise Jewish storytelling. Richler had the unique gift of craftmanly dedication that made it a matter of pride with him to be
able to write acceptably in any context. He wrote with an artistry that often reached a high level that exhibited his professionalism.

Like most of his contemporaries, Richler could rely on no collective myth to sustain him. He could not afford to sacrifice his individuality either. These urges stirred in him as he endeavoured to combat the collectivistic manias of his age. But he knew too that if he followed strictly the bidding of desire as the supreme law of his being, he was in effect separating himself from the great body of humanity. He had at all costs to be himself, but to be himself was not enough. On the one hand, he jealously guarded the sacredness of his individuality and on the other he detested the foibles and the pettiness of modern man.

Richler invoked the image of man as a living mystery that is fused and flows with the cosmic stream of energy. Over and over again, he stressed the urgent need for man to plant himself in his deeper instinctive self and to heed the voice of his dreams. This faith is one of the major reasons why Richler turned against those systems of thought that made collectivity dominant at the expense of the individual. He protested against all attempts to control the mind as if it were a rational machine or to condition the individual as if he was nothing more than a cell in the social organization.
Richler's creative work as a whole represented a heroic quest for the authenticity of being. This quest, he perceived, could never take a fixed form, for it was essentially indefinable, a plunge into the dark unfathomable depth of the mind. For him the individual is of supreme importance. To capture this secret of integral selfhood, one must have the courage to become what he is, regardless of conventional moral standards or institutional ideals. That is why, Richler's hero even when the odds are against him, will not submit to the dictates of society.

The works of Richler evince an acute consciousness of the relation that exists between mythology and personal identity and also of the consequences that may ensue in the interior life of an individual from his uncritical acquiescence in the ideologies, moral codes and value systems instilled into him by his society. The nature of this relation between the public and the personal can be indicated by remarking that while for Richler identity comprises the way in which the individual or perceives himself, a mythology embodies the way in which a nation or a culture or any other community collectively defines or perceives itself. Under ideal circumstances, these personal and public self-conceptions might be continuous with one another and even mutually validating, but it is not uncommonly the case that they failed to coincide.
A disjunction between personal identity and public mythology might manifest itself in the form of a feeling that is no longer consistent with the reality of experience. Or, in the case of a minority group within a society, individuals might be simultaneously exposed to a plurality of mythologies, the competing claims of which cannot be reconciled among themselves. It is this consciousness of the gulf that can open up between the individual's perception of himself and the models offered by his society that explains the prominence accorded to myth as a narrative strategy in Richler's fiction. The problems of identity, mythology and commitment are elaborated to excellent effects in his novels. His protagonists become aware that the range of possible choices has contracted, all ideological alignments are in the end equally suspect, and the only commitments that can be made are of a purely personal character. This necessitates them—to borrow Noah Adler's words—to choose, so as not to choose, looking for salvation in the minor decencies rather than in large but potentially compromising public commitments.

Richler was using literature as a form of constraining magic, relying on the power of his imagination to weave a spell of myth over the mind of the reader. Richler, the poetic celebrant of myth, was not concerned with propositional or empirical truths. He cared
only about the release of his imagination. He was attracted to myth because it was never an argument, it never has a didactic nor a moral purpose and often, no conclusion can be drawn from it. It seems clear that many of the theories in myth seem to animate the human imagination. It hardly seems possible that we will ever be able to understand human imagination in purely rational, historical or scientific terms. Yet the elusive goal of finding these common features in art and literature continue to inspire us.


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