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**“Between Things”: Public Mythology and Personal Identity  
in The Fiction of Mordecai Richler**

In the characteristically mordant introduction to an anthology of Canadian writing published in 1970, Mordecai Richler remarks of his native country that “we are still a fragmentary nation, yet to be bound by a unifying principle, a distinctive voice, a mythology of our own.”<sup>1</sup> Viewed in the light of this and similar statements Richler’s own work, the production of a Canadian who has spent the better part of his creative life abroad, might in its totality be interpreted as a protracted, and persistently renewed, quest for such a mythology, pursued at a distance and doomed, self-consciously, to inevitable and repeated failure. It is a quest which exhibits a destructive as well as explorative aspect, entailing as its necessary corollary the systematic demolition of those surrogate myths—fraudulent, coercive, or merely instrumental—which are perceived as obstacles to the realization of a truly vital mythology. Richler’s upbringing in the Jewish ghetto of Montreal, where he was exposed at an impressionable age to a bewildering multiplicity of rival traditions urging conflicting patterns of conduct and incompatible allegiances, has rendered him deeply distrustful of efforts to contrive a national (or any other) mythology by what he regards as artificial means. In particular, he is acutely conscious of the intimate and yet often hazardous relation that exists between public mythology and personal identity, and is concerned in much of his work to examine the destructive ramifications that may ensue in the interior life of the individual from an uncritical acquiescence in the spurious systems of value instilled into him by society.

The nature of this relation between the public and the personal can be indicated, albeit somewhat reductively, by remarking that while for Richler identity comprises the way in which the individual defines 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 corporate self-

conceptions might be continuous with one another and even mutually sustaining, but very often they fail to coincide. A disjunction between personal identity and public mythology might manifest itself in the form of a feeling, more or less explicitly articulated, that an inherited mythology has exhausted itself, that it 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 different 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 the theme of exile in Richler's work, for the condition of physical exile can objectify in exemplary form this sense of personal estrangement from cultural archetypes which, at least in the modern context, fail satisfactorily to compose private experience.

It is not difficult in reading Richler's autobiographical sketches to perceive why it is that a youngster growing up in the Montreal Jewish ghetto in the years immediately preceding the Second World War should have felt somewhat uncertain as to his cultural allegiances. To cite a representative and eloquent example, the sense of cultural ambivalence that pervades much of Richler's work, the sensation of being torn between rival traditions or "mythologies", finds poignant expression in the author's anecdote concerning his early reading of John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. Buchan, the Governor-General of Canada, "stood for the ultimate British virtues. Fair play, clean living, gentlemanly conduct."<sup>2</sup> But his work also disclosed a distinct vein of anti-Semitism, with the consequence that a perplexing sense of inner tension or divided loyalties was generated in the young Jewish reader. "As badly as I wanted to identify with [Buchan's character] Hannay, two-fisted soldier of fortune," Richler recalls, "I couldn't without betraying myself."<sup>3</sup> To a very large extent this conflict between "Jewish" and "Canadian" identities could not be resolved at the level of the individual at all, but occasioned a painful rift between the generations:

During the years leading up to the war . . . there . . . began the familiar and agonizing process of alienation between immigrant parents and Canadian-born children. Our older brothers and cousins, off to university, came home to realize that our parents spoke with embarrassing accents. Even the younger boys, like myself, were going to "their" schools. According to them, the priests had made a tremendous contribution to the exploration and development of this country. Some were heroes. But, our parents had other memories, different ideas, about the priesthood. At school we were taught about the glory of the Crusades and at home we were instructed in the bloodier side of the story . . .

From the very beginning there was their history, and ours. Our heroes, and theirs.<sup>4</sup>

It is scarcely surprising under these circumstances that Richler should have developed a highly individual perspective on the problems of cultural and personal identity, as well as on the related problem of choosing allegiances and living by them—issues that recur as thematic constants in his fiction. At the same time the detached, evaluative and often severely critical attitude towards culture that such an environment fostered is not altogether peculiar to the ghetto, but may be seen rather as a heightened or amplified version of an endemic feature of Canadian cultural life. While it would perhaps be somewhat extravagant to claim that the Montreal ghetto constitutes an actual microcosm of the Canadian cultural scene, it is nevertheless a fact that Richler's sense of cultural ambivalence reflects in particularly vivid form the Canadian's chronic problem of feeling perennially betwixt and between: of being neither American nor European, but somehow simultaneously both; of knowing the importance of a shared mythology and anxious to assert an independent national identity, but not at all certain as to what such a mythology or identity might be based on. Richler takes Canada's famous identity crisis and, rather than trying to resolve it, transforms it into the material of fiction, elaborating in his work a paradoxical mythology founded on the absence of mythology, an identity consisting in the quest for identity.

My intention in this paper is to consider how the mutually implicating problems of "mythology", commitment and personal identity figure as thematic concerns throughout Richler's fiction, and how the author employs the condition of exile—a condition to which he himself submitted for much of his writing career—to dramatize the relation between the individual and the cultural patterns he must choose among. The first work I wish to discuss, *Son of a Smaller Hero*, might be described as a kind of Jewish-Canadian *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, though it also owes a great deal to Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*—a debt acknowledged in the name of one of the female characters. It is a novel about escape, about flight in the first instance from the claustrophobic ghetto world which overdetermines conduct and attitudes, and in the second from the facile and ultimately futile psychological strategy of attempting to establish one's own identity merely in opposition to one's background. Richler is profoundly aware of the paradox that the effort to define one's identity or culture in deliberate contrast to another is often to create nothing more than a shadow or mirror-image of the original. The crippling relation of dependency remains intact, even if the relation has been converted into

a negative one, and the individual runs the risk of becoming indistinguishable from what he professes to deplore. Thus the expatriate artists with whom Richler consorted in Paris in the Fifties were, according to the author, "not so much non-conformists as subject to [their] own peculiar conformities or . . . anti-bourgeois inversions."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, left-wing writers and film producers living in London resort to McCarthyite tactics to enforce their own cherished orthodoxies in *A Choice of Enemies*, while some of the Israelis described in Richler's essay "This Year in Jerusalem" (and later in *St. Urbain's Horseman*) betray disturbing symptoms of what the writer diagnoses as "anti-Semitism". Noah Adler in *Son of a Smaller Hero* becomes conscious of this peril only after partially succumbing to it, and the novel is accordingly structured around not one but two partings, two phases of exile, beginning with the young man leaving home, and culminating in his abandoning Canada altogether. In the interval that elapses between these two critical events he explores some of the cultural options available to him in Montreal, from the ostensibly enlightened but covertly desperate world of educated Gentiles, to that of the ghetto-emancipated, semi-assimilated Jews of Outremont and Ste Agathe, and finds all of these not only intrinsically unsatisfactory but also, in the final analysis, remarkably similar in essence.

Merely leaving the ghetto, Noah discovers early, is no panacea for his intense feelings of frustration. Ghetto life has merely focused his discontent, giving it a local habitation and a name. "At home his indignation had nourished him", we are told: "Being wretched, and in opposition, had organized his suffering".<sup>6</sup> Detachment promotes a clearer vision, however, and at the same time as he begins to recognize the validity and even charm of some of the traditional values that his grandfather Melech defends with unyielding tenacity, so also does he begin to suspect that in his own way he might merely be duplicating his grandfather's most fundamental error—that of defining himself in opposition to what is conceived to be the enemy. Noah explains to his mistress Miriam that there exists a kind of Jew who is dependent upon the Gentiles for his own self-conception, so that "take the *Goy* away from him and you're pulling out the thread that holds him together".<sup>7</sup> He wonders however whether he is not perhaps guilty of the identical error with respect to his own people: "Did I need them, he thought, the way my grandfather needs the *Goyim*?...It's not enough to rebel, he thought. To destroy. It is necessary to say yes to something".<sup>8</sup> All the same, it is too late now to return to the fold, as Noah endeavours to explain to his grandfather:

Can't you see how everything is falling apart around you? Your sons are Canadians. I am not even that . . . . I can't be something, or serve something, I no longer believe in. As it is, well . . . I'm sort of between things. I was born a Jew but somewhere along the way . . . . You can't go back, *Zeyda*. It would be easy if you could.<sup>9</sup>

The echo of Stephen Dedalus's defiant "I will not serve", itself an allusion to Satan's sin of intellectual pride, is unmistakable. But if it is one thing to believe abstractly in the necessity of affirmation and commitment, of "say[ing] yes to something", it is quite another to find something to which one can unreservedly extend one's allegiance. Noah's father not inaccurately diagnoses his son's plight when he tells him that "you're no longer a Jew and you'll never become one of them. So what are you? A nothing . . .".<sup>10</sup> This terror of being "nothing", or the consuming compulsion to become "somebody" which is its obverse, animates a number of Richler's characters—notably Duddy Kravitz, who becomes a "somebody" only at the cost of renouncing almost everything that might make him anybody.<sup>11</sup> The aspiration after a determinate identity, which begins as a private existential drive and which projects itself outward to become a cultural imperative, is the force that impels both men and nations to seek out myths in which they can recognize themselves. But Noah, though he too is "hungering for an anger or a community or a tradition to which he could relate his experience", is disabled by the conviction that "there is no longer anything that one could wholly belong to. This is the time of buts and parentheses".<sup>12</sup>

Noah is subjected to a disturbing revelation when he discovers a new Jewish reality in the Laurentian resort town of Ste Agathe, and realizes that "the people, the laws, that he had rebelled against had been replaced by other, less conspicuously false, laws and people while he had been away":

That shifting of the ghetto sands seemed terribly unfair to him. If the standard man can be defined by his possessions, then rob his house and you steal his identity. Noah had supposed himself not to be a standard man. But his house had been robbed and his identity had been lost. He was shaken. Not only because he felt a need to redefine himself, but because he realized, at last, that all this time he had only been defining himself Against.<sup>13</sup>

The values represented by these "emancipated" Jews are in the end no more worthy of fidelity than the traditions Noah has already discarded: here too "truth was adroitly side-stepped".<sup>14</sup> What Noah has therefore attained to by the time he leaves for Europe is not so much a consolidated identity as a reasonably lucid perspective on what he is doing. If mechanical conformity with any structure of beliefs is not the

answer, then neither is mechanical rejection. This realization makes possible a partial, if equivocal, reconciliation with his grandfather, to whom the young man is able in the end to declare: "I am going and I'm not going. I can no more leave you, my mother, or my father's memory, than I can renounce myself. But I can refuse to take part in this . . .".<sup>15</sup> No less importantly, he also comes to perceive essential continuities in human experience that are more profound than the transmitted values that hold the members of a religious group together. If he has already learned that he has merely been repeating Melech's error in trying to define himself by contrast with an external enemy, he also discovers that his grandfather, like himself, once loved a Gentile girl and deserted her in order to pursue his own quest for self-definition. It is to these deeper rhythms of life, cycles of betrayal and aspiration, that Noah is implicitly assimilating his own experience when he asks his grandfather for one of the Hebrew texts that he has been laboriously transcribing over the years. The fact that this gift is bestowed despite a lingering hostility on Melech's part amounts to an ambiguous laying on of hands, one generation ruefully recognizing its own flawed image in the other.

At one point in *Son of a Smaller Hero* Noah remarks: "Nothing is absolute any longer .... There is a choice of beliefs and a choice of truths to go with them. If you choose not to choose then there is no truth at all. There are only points of view".<sup>16</sup> The necessity of defining oneself through determinate choice, in a world which seems to render all choices equally suspect, constitutes a problem not only for Noah but also for Norman Price in *A Choice of Enemies*. The title is an apparent allusion to Oscar Wilde's dictum that "a man cannot be too careful in the choice of his enemies", but it is perhaps also reminiscent of the "choice of nightmares" that Marlow feels called upon to make in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Hovering in the background of Norman's dilemma in his consciousness that for his father's generation choices seemed much more clearly defined, the Spanish Civil War appearing to compel unreserved moral commitments: "But in those days . . . the choice of enemies had been clear. Today you were no longer altogether sure . . . Your loyalties . . . were sentimental; they lacked true conviction".<sup>17</sup> The ostensible reason for Norman's decision to reside in London is that he came under suspicion by the un-American Activities Committee and was obliged to resign his university post in the United States. This heroic episode in his past affords him an identity, a clearly delineated role to play among the small community of blacklisted dissidents living in London, but there is no compelling conviction behind what he does. He is merely marking time, working sporadically on a book about John Dryden (that quin-

tessential man for all seasons), and supporting himself by writing film scripts and thrillers. He has little significant contact with the Englishmen in whose country he lives, and recognizes at a certain point that far from representing the engaged few, he and the entire colony to which he belongs are estranged from the real life around them, that "all his friends in London are aliens like himself", being "picked off one by one by the cold, drink, and indifference".<sup>18</sup> It is evident that his expatriot status is the outward token of an inner condition, an essential rootlessness and lack of commitment: a state of being, as Noah Adler puts it, "sort of between things".

Norman is jarred from his inertia by the arrival on the scene of an East German refugee named Ernst, who because he has freely elected to leave a socialist state arouses the automatic hostility of the left-wing expatriates in London. Although Ernst has in fact been a member of the Hitler Youth, Norman is prepared to concede him the benefit of the doubt, and makes an unexpected and unpremeditated choice of enemies when he takes the part of the youth against his own former friends. This spontaneous gesture of solidarity seems at first to promise Norman some prospect of release from his excessively inhibited mode of existence, but it also begins to undermine his sense of his own identity:

Although he hadn't been a party member for several years he remained a Marxist yet. This gave him the benefit of a code, a system of responses, that was of singular value to him. Helping Ernst was contrary to that code. For the first time Norman began to feel the sands shift under him.<sup>19</sup>

The image of the shifting sands recalls Noah's reaction when confronted with the modern Jews of Ste Agathe. Another expatriate admonishes Norman that "in this world you've got to make a choice of enemies or you just can't live. The boy stands for everything you and I are against".<sup>20</sup> In other words Norman should range himself against Ernst for reasons which are in the final analysis little more than formal: it is not what the youth is that counts, but what he represents according to a rather schematic interpretation of reality. What Norman realizes however is that what has grown up in London is less a genuine fraternity of dissent than a mere counter-Establishment, a shadow of the system it attacks, and like that system imposing its own harsh orthodoxy on its members. Measured beside this glib and uncritical left-wing piety Ernst's tormented cynicism, his bitter awareness that all principles are ultimately contingent, conditioned by circumstances, and so inevitably provisional, strikes Norman as at least sincere. The essential validity of Ernst's outlook would seem to receive the tacit

endorsement even of Karp, the former inmate of a Nazi concentration camp, who discovers a bizarre basis of solidarity with the ex-Nazi in the fact that they are both, in not so widely differing ways, "survivors".

"Surviving", indeed, would seem to be the final word of this bleak and uncomfortably ironic novel. Little of any magnitude is resolved in the end, and all positions are compromised. Norman discovers that Ernst is the man who has murdered his brother in Berlin, but succumbs to amnesia before managing to carry out his project of revenge. Faced with the prospect of imprisonment, Ernst flees to Montreal, where he achieves unexpected and absurd celebrity when he saves the life of a Jew. The final comment of the novel, if we are to interpret Norman's concluding meditations as an expression of Richler's own convictions, would seem to advocate a reduced vision of life as the only viable outlook in an era of small virtues and smaller expectations. Norman finally commits himself so far as to marry an unremarkable English girl, but is chagrined to discover that for her generation his political posture has become outmoded, that he is regarded now merely as "the fossil of a sillier age".<sup>21</sup> The deflating realization that the codes he has been living by are now scorned as ludicrously anachronistic sparks off a train of thought reminiscent of *Candide*:

This time of opinions, battle-stations, and no absolutes, was also a time to consolidate. This time of no heroes but hyperbole, where treason was only loyalty looked at closely, and faith, honour, and courage had become the small change of crafty politicians, was also a time to persevere. To persevere was a most serious virtue.

If there was a time to man the barricades, Norman thought, then there is also a time to weed one's private garden. The currency of revolution is invalid as long as both tyrannies bank big bombs. Each age creates its own idiom. This was a time to drop a nickel in the blindman's box and to recommend worth-while movies to strangers, it was a time to play their game but to make your *own* errors, a time to wait and a time to hope. The enemy was no longer the boor in power on the right or the bore out of power on the left. All alliances had been discredited.<sup>22</sup>

The range of possible choice has contracted, all ideological alignments are in the end equally suspect, and the only commitments that can with moral impunity be made are of a purely personal character—which is why "in this time of wrecks, Norman . . . chose at last to lead a private life".<sup>23</sup> What Norman is in effect doing is, to borrow Noah Adler's words, "choos[ing] not to choose", looking for salvation in the minor decencies rather than in large but potentially compromising public commitments.

After this perhaps excessively solemn manifesto of neutral conservatism, Richler's fiction veers in the direction of pure satire, calculated to discredit ideological positions not so much on theoretical grounds



as by exposing their essentially mythological character. The seeds of Richler's distinctive satire are already present in *A Choice of Enemies*, in which the protagonist is at one point subjected in his absence to something suspiciously resembling a McCarthyite witch-trial, presided over however by the very men who complain of having been the victims of similar injustices in the past. This tactic of reversing role configurations is central to the comic technique of *The Incomparable Atuk*, which deals parodically with some of Richler's by now familiar themes. The story of a Baffin Bay Eskimo who tries to make his way in the big city after his poetry has been acclaimed as a triumph of native art is an entertaining skit on detribalization, on cultural dislocation or translocation, as well as on the Canadian culture industry. The comedy of the book turns on multiple inversions: it is now the native Canadian who is "exiled" in modern Toronto, older Eskimos talk and think like orthodox Jews while their irredentist children propose to herd the non-Eskimo population of Canada into reservations, Jewish crank intellectuals demonstrate the racial inferiority of WASPs on "scientific" grounds reminiscent of those adduced by Nazi ideologues, and so forth. In the end the scheming Atuk—an eskimo version of Duddy Kravitz—gets hopelessly out of his depth in the world of mass media and industrial conglomerates, and ends by being guillotined in the course of an American-sponsored quiz show. This public martyrdom has been staged by an industrial magnate in order to furnish Canadians with a hero to whose memory they can rally. The ultimate aim is to mobilize anti-American sentiments and thus promote Canadian industrial interests, the mystique of nationalism having been cynically enlisted into the service of the false gods of commerce.

The problems of identity, mythology and commitment, and the technique of role inversion which is employed to dramatize them, are elaborated to excellent effect in *Cocksure*, the hero of which is one of a line of Richler characters who on the face of it at least enjoy enviable prosperity and prestige, but whose contentment and complacent self-esteem are eroded by gnawing inner doubts which eventually precipitate a headlong collapse into absurdity. Mortimer Griffon, like Norman Page, is a Canadian living in London: he is a successful publishing editor, of the purest WASP extraction and upbringing, and a decorated war hero to boot. His tribulations begin when he is presumed to be a Jew by the editor of a Jewish journal who has attended his lecture on Kafka. Disconcerted by this insidious attack on his identity, he gradually succumbs to a species of paranoia, becoming pathologically self-conscious and holding agitated inquiries into his own attitudes and motives. His irritation that Shalinsky should mistake him for a Jew, and his anxious self-interrogations as to why this does in fact so

perturb him, conduct him by degrees towards a state of self-loathing in the light of which the values that have hitherto structured his private universe suddenly appear vile and hypocritical. He feels suburban, too conventionally good-looking, too "white" by far:

Yes, yes, Mortimer thought, a good credit risk, that's me. Loyal. Hard-working. Honest. Liberal . . . The virtues I was raised to believe in have become pernicious. . . . "Protestant," he said aloud. "White Anglo-Saxon Protestant filth, that's what you are."<sup>24</sup>

Lurking in the background of the novel is the sinister figure of the Star Maker, kept alive by the continual substitution of limbs and organs as his own deteriorate, and accompanied wherever he goes by an entourage of "spare parts men" retained for the sole purpose of serving as donors. At one point this bizarre character explains to Mortimer, whose "marvy lymphatic system" he covets, how he and other Hollywood magnates once joined forces to design and construct android film stars. By defining the role models which movie-goers emulated, these film tycoons, none of whom were themselves WASPs, effectively moulded the American consciousness according to their own blueprint. "There we were, you see," he gloatingly recalls, "a handful of kikes, dagos, and greaseballs, controlling the images Protestant America worshipped".<sup>25</sup> It is on precisely such stereotypes as these, of course, that Mortimer has modelled his own by now hopelessly bankrupt conception of himself.

Beneath the surrealistic and at times perhaps gratuitously scurrilous surface of this novel is a serious analysis of the deterioration of an Establishment-reared man who is deprived, one after another, of the cherished myths upon which his image of himself has been founded: his belief in his own virility, in the sincerity of his liberal outlook, even in the moral validity of his heroism during the war (his Victoria Cross is derided during a television interview as no more than a certificate of conformity). It is this relation between personal identity and public myths which links Mortimer's private ordeal to the larger canvas constituted by the Star Maker's complex machinations, and I cannot concur with George Woodcock's criticism that the "two currents of action" in the novel "never really coalesce".<sup>26</sup> The true character of the civilization that men such as the Star Maker (and the interests they represent) quietly control from behind the scenes is indicated in the grotesquely second-hand existence conducted by the enticing but vacuous Polly Morgan, who as her name suggests only parrots the symbols of which that civilization is constructed. The rows of books lining the entry hall in her flat turn out to be, on closer inspection, merely photographs of books pasted to the wall, while her living room is

decorated with art reproductions and a coal-effect gas fire installed in an imitation fireplace. Everything in her life, from candlelight dinners to lovemaking, is patterned on screenplays, with cuts and dissolves artfully inserted at the critical moments, so that although the preliminaries appear promising enough the consummations always remain devoutly to be wished. In the end Mortimer is destroyed by this world, his lymphatic system evidently being destined to serve higher purposes, but not before he has learned an important truth from Shalinsky. This seedy but fervently committed individual continues to insist that Mortimer is a Jew, and when Mortimer demurs one final time explains patiently that "a Jew is an idea. Today you're my idea of a Jew".<sup>27</sup> Identity is in the end less a private possession than a function of the external mythology that constitutes it, and loss of faith in that mythology inevitably entails the loss of self as well.

The circumstance that Mortimer Griffon is an expatriate is chiefly of significance in that his condition denies him any external supports with which to shore up his identity once this begins to crumble under the pressure of Shalinsky's arch insinuations. It helps to underscore the fact that the myths he lives by, far from being universally valid, are fragile, highly contingent fictions, dependent for their viability on the endorsement of those around—who are of course intent on preserving *their* own myths. The collision of cultures is rendered to some degree in the escapades of Mortimer's fourth-grade teacher from Ontario, whose illusions concerning the rectitude of the English way of life are shattered shortly after her arrival in the country, and who evolves her own highly original method of dealing with the matter; but this aspect of the situation is not explored in any depth. The condition of exile assumes a more poignant and one imagines for Richler a more personal resonance in *St. Urbain's Horseman*, the protagonist of which finds himself wondering on occasion whether leaving Canada was in fact a sound decision at all. Unlike the expatriate Canadians in *A Choice of Enemies* and *Cocksure*, Jacob Hersh is Jewish, a true son of the Montreal ghetto who counts the inimitable Duddy Kravitz among his friends. Jake's uneasy relation with his own Jewish background, and his dim sense that contemporary life offers very little in the way of tenable myths, finds expression in a fantasy which assumes the proportions of a private cult. He casts his mysterious cousin Joey in the role of an avenging Horseman who roams the world in pursuit of the enemies of the Jewish people, and remains obstinately loyal to this shadowy personage even when the evidence he accumulates in the course of his own wanderings paints a rather less romantic portrait of him.

Jake has abandoned Canada because it seems to him an artistic wilderness, a vast but culturally amorphous territory deficient from the points of view both of national identity and of creative potential:

They had emerged . . . from . . . a place that had produced no art and had exalted self-deprecation above all. They were the progeny of a twice-rejected land. From the beginning, Canada's two founding races, the English and the French, had outbid each other in scornfully disinheriting them. . . . Jake, Luke, and others of their generation were reared to believe in the cultural thinness of their own blood. Anemia was their heritage.<sup>28</sup>

Jake and the other Canadians living in London feel that they have nothing in common with the expatriates of other countries, for they are bereft even of an authentic sense of injustice in terms of which it might be possible to define their national and personal identities: "Adrift in a cosmopolitan sea of conflicting mythologies, only they had none. Moving among discontented commonwealth types in London, they were inclined to envy them their real grievances".<sup>29</sup> The embarrassing note of self-commiseration in Jake's early assumption that he is somehow culturally deprived because there are no sufficiently momentous quarrels on the home front with which he can identify is adolescent and, in view of Canada's by no means negligible social problems, obtuse in the extreme. It does however indicate to what degree his sense of his country's deficiencies, and the exile he has chosen in response to those deficiencies, are attributable to his state of mind rather than to Canada's actual situation. Nor has establishing himself in London, and attracting very considerable professional recognition, been sufficient to fill this void, for even the myth of English excellence has fallen sadly short of expectations:

Slowly, inexorably, he was being forced to pay the price of the colonial come to the capital. In the provinces, he had been able to revere London and its offerings with impunity. . . . As his father had blamed the *goyim* for his own inadequacies, mentally billing them for the sum of his misfortunes, so Jake had foolishly held Canada culpable for all his discontents. Coming to London, finding it considerably less than excellent, he was at once deprived of this security blanket. The more he achieved . . . the larger his inner hunger . . . . He would have been happiest had the capital's standards not been so readily attainable and that it were still possible for him to have icons.<sup>30</sup>

The fact that Jake has elected to work in the film industry, and so to dedicate his energy to the construction of purveyable fictions, itself works counter to his most fundamental need, and he is plagued by the disturbing sense of being morally rootless, of being neither fish nor fowl, of being—once again—somehow "between things":

If only he labored for Dow Chemical, yielding napalm, and so was utterly committed to evil, or if, conversely, he practiced medicine among the Bantu, death's enemy . . . . As it was, he was merely an other ranks contributor to the arts.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to his feelings of cultural alienation and his evident insecurity as regards his own identity, Jake is afflicted by a sense of temporal exile, of estrangement even from history. This harks back to Norman Page's final conclusion that there are no truly significant decisions left to make, that even the choice of enemies has become impossible. "Wrong place, wrong time", Jake thinks: "Young too late, old too soon was . . . the plaintive story of his American generation . . . . Always the wrong age. Ever observers, never participants".<sup>32</sup> He feels that "the times had not used but compromised them", and fears that one day his age group "would be dismissed as trivial, a peripheral generation".<sup>33</sup> He can find no comfort even in his cultural background, for "even as Jews, they [those of his generation] did not fit a mythology. Not having gone like sheep to the slaughterhouse, but also too fastidious to punish Arab villages with napalm".<sup>34</sup>

It is clearly in an effort to discover or create a mythology in which he can anchor his own identity that Jake's mind reverts to his boyhood in the Montreal ghetto, his imagination, like Richler's own, obsessively circling around a place that no longer exists. The Horseman, haunted like himself by history and resolute in redressing its wrongs, is his link between past and present, the means by which Jake tries to compensate for his own sense of inadequacy, an external projection of his feeling of having somehow been overlooked by the march of events. Towards the end of the novel, back in Montreal for his father's funeral, Jake learns the unsavoury truth about Joey's real character. Nevertheless, in a gesture reminiscent of Norman's spontaneous defense of Ernst in *A Choice of Enemies*, Jake reaffirms his loyalty to his cousin in spite of everything, insisting before his self-satisfied uncles that "the Hersh family honor rides on Joey's back, not your complacent shoulders, and my heart belongs to him".<sup>35</sup> In the end it would seem that it is the myth, and not the actuality, that counts, and that the imaginary rider can himself be ridden by the frustrated imagination.

The obverse of this compensatory process of identification reveals itself in the strange relationship that develops between Jake and the man who is blackmailing him for one of Joey's misdemeanors: the embittered and perverted clerk Harry Stein. Stein is also Jewish, and for no apparent reason is occasionally addressed as Hershel by Jake (whose own name, Hersh, is also that of the Horseman). In spite of his cringing meanness, or perhaps because of it, he has the audacity and the animus to commit acts of gratuitous outrage of which Jake himself

would be incapable. Yet Jake, though affecting lofty disdain, is not altogether aloof from these vicious gestures, but derives rather some measure of vicarious gratification from them. "I amuse you", Stein informs him at one point: ". . . I've got the courage to do things you only dream of".<sup>36</sup> It would seem that if Joey supplies him with a congenial myth, then Stein functions as a kind of *Dopplegänger* or Conradian "secret sharer", with the consequence that Jake is drawn despite himself into a bizarre complicity with this singularly repellent figure which culminates in their being tried together for a sexual offence.

In the end both of these psychological projections are exorcised at least as external agencies, Stein being sent to prison and Joey perishing in a plane crash while engaged in one of his various illicit pursuits. But the Horseman does not vanish utterly from the scene, for after learning of his cousin's death Jake assumes the persona himself, becoming one with his own myth. What this entails in the subsequent life of this character is not revealed to us, for the novel concludes at this point. It is perhaps worth noting however that the hero of Richler's subsequent novel, Joshua Shapiro, combines features of both Joey and Stein, for on the one hand he dreams of revenging himself on an ex-Nazi as Jake's Horseman was supposed to be tracking down Dr. Mengele, and on the other he indulges like Stein in wanton acts of mischief directed against individuals whose bourgeois complacency he despises.

*Joshua Then and Now* was written after Richler's return to Canada, but it continues to pursue the themes of literal and figurative exile, the quest for a viable "mythology", and personal and cultural allegiance which I have been discussing in connection with the earlier works. From the point of view of structure and even of situation this novel is not dissimilar to *St. Urbain's Horseman*. It opens with a depiction of the protagonist in an absurd seemingly inexplicable situation, and delves back to different periods in the past in order to account for what appears to be a totally incomprehensible present, incrementally supplying fuller information on each successive return. The title *Joshua Then and Now* emphasizes the combination of temporal continuity and discontinuity which is central to the theme as well as the structure of the work. What we are in the present is determined by the past, yet it is often difficult even in retrospect to identify the precise nexus of events: the process that seems relentlessly causal in its operations can also appear wholly arbitrary in the directions it pursues. Joshua's life has been conditioned by personal circumstances, but also by the history of his race and by the history of Europe in which he has not directly participated. Once again, the fundamental problem of the

protagonist is that of defining his own identity in relation to some external code or system of values. Another product of the Montreal ghetto, who like his predecessors in Richler's fiction feels fettered by the mythology instilled into him by his Jewish upbringing, he is seeking a more credible structure of beliefs, a twentieth-century myth, and at an early stage in his career at least hopes to find it by conducting research into the history of the Spanish Civil War. Like most of Richler's heroes from Noah Adler on, Joshua is "sort of between things", restlessly searching for a commitment that his Canadian upbringing has failed to supply:

Canadian-born, he sometimes felt as if he were condemned to lope slant-shouldered through this world that confused him. One shoulder sloping downwards, groaning under the weight of his Jewish heritage . . . the other thrust heavenwards, yearning for an inheritance, any inheritance, weightier than the construction of a transcontinental railway, a reputation for honest trading, good skiing conditions.<sup>37</sup>

But although he has uprooted himself physically from the Montreal ghetto, he does not find it altogether easy even in Europe to abdicate his cultural identity. The claims of race continue to intrude: "he had come to Spain to . . . learn what he could about the Spanish Civil War. Instead, he was discovering that he was Jewish. Something anybody could have told him."<sup>38</sup> Despite himself he is driven into demonstrations of solidarity with other Jews, including men whose national backgrounds are entirely different from his own and with whom he feels little personal sympathy. On the island of Ibiza he even finds himself to some extent reenacting history in his relationship with Dr. Mueller, who seems to have been a Nazi during the war. It is his failure, as he conceives it, adequately to shield his Jewish friends from the machinations of this individual that impels him, many years later, to repeat his journey to Ibiza in the hope of redeeming the past by confronting his old enemy once and for all. But the time that has stood still in Jake's recollection has not been so accommodating on Ibiza. Dr. Mueller has inconsiderately died in the meantime, the once picturesque island has altered beyond recognition, and Joshua learns that events have not in fact transpired precisely as he remembered they had. Much of his mature life has, after all, been founded on a myth, if only that of some critical fall from grace.

In most of his novels, as we have seen, Richler successfully evaded the problem of writing about a country of whose current reality he had little first-hand experience through the simple expedient of erecting the condition of exile into a fundamental premise of his fiction. By elaborating the metaphorical resonances of this situation, exploring its

moral and psychological connotations, he has I believe succeeded in creating something of general significance out of a variety of experience that might at first sight appear distinctly limited in its imaginative possibilities. Writing in exile almost inevitably entails writing about the past, but this ceases to be a drawback the moment the individual's relation with his past is foregrounded as a significant theme in itself. Margaret Atwood argues in *Survival* that Canadian writers living abroad "can use exile as a vantage point, a 'mountain' from which to view their own authentic culture, and that may work for a while; but the 'valley' that can be seen from such a mountain will always be *only* in the past, and the past, sooner or later, runs out"—and she cites Richler's work as an illustration.<sup>39</sup> But the truth is that the past will never run out as long as the present continues to transform itself into history, and it is precisely because he is able to manipulate temporal planes with such dexterity that Richler makes the past such a potentially inexhaustible quarry on which the imagination can draw. The past is not immutably fixed, but subject to endless review and reevaluation, constantly "rewritten" in the light of current concerns, as much a product of the present as the present is of it. *Joshua Then and Now*, though not, in my view, as substantial an achievement as *St. Urbain's Horseman*, nonetheless effectively demonstrates that the exploration of the past need never cease, that it becomes in fact an increasingly complex undertaking as the past inexorably becomes a vaster and more mysterious place. Joshua's present in Montreal is superimposed upon his past in Europe, which is superimposed in its turn upon his boyhood in the Jewish quarter of Montreal—and this process of temporal superimposition might be continued indefinitely. A cyclical pattern emerges in spite of and indeed because of the disruptions of exile, and this pattern, affording the possibility of a kind of *temps retrouvé*, can bind the life of the individual to that of his species.

Richler is well aware of the irony latent in the fact that exile, though perhaps resorted to as a means of escaping the burden of one's historical background, can in the end lead the individual to duplicate that background in the circumstances of his own life. Before returning to Canada in 1967, Richler writes, he discovered that

I no longer understood the idiom. Doomed to be always a foreigner in England, I was now in danger of finding Canada foreign too. After thirteen almost uninterrupted years abroad, I now realized the move I had made with such certainty at the age of twenty-three had exacted a considerable price. Some foggy, depressing nights it seemed to me that I had come full circle. Many years ago my parents emigrated from Poland to Canada, to Montreal, where I grew up ashamed of their



Yiddish accents. Now I had seemingly settled in London, where my own children . . . found my American accent just as embarrassing.<sup>40</sup>

Not dissimilarly, the protagonist of *Joshua Then and Now* discovers that history repeats itself in the most unlikely forms, and confronted with what he perceives as “echoes, echoes”, is forced to entertain the possibility at least that there exists some analogy between his situation and that of a man he has hitherto regarded as the opposite of himself in every conceivable respect. I have already observed that in Richler’s early novel *Son of a Smaller Hero* Noah Adler comes by degrees to recognize an unsuspected affinity between himself and his grandfather in the circumstance that they have both loved and deserted Gentile girls before submitting themselves to their respective forms of exile, and the former concentration camp inmate Karp glimpses a similar basis of solidarity in the situation of the ex-Nazi Ernst in *A Choice of Enemies*. It would seem to be these smaller continuities of experience, and not the ambitious mythologies through which men endeavour to impart a public significance to their lives, that afford the possibility of genuine contact between individuals, and these that the author appears to be finally affirming in his novels. In the majority of Richler’s works the tension between personal identity and the myths which constitute, but at the same time circumscribe and even undermine, that identity remains unresolved: either the myth is exploded and the individual left suspended in a moral vacuum, or myth triumphs at the expense of the all too expendable human subject. What begins as a quest for a mythology in which the individual can recognize and so define himself thus ends as a meditation on its own impossibility, and only in the sphere of personal relationships, informed by purely private commitments and values, is the suggestion allowed to persist that some at least partial discovery of self may after all be possible.

#### NOTES

1. Richler (ed.), *Canadian Writing Today* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 23.
2. Richler, *The Street* (London, reprinted 1972), p. 29.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-6.
5. Richler, *The Great Comic Book Heroes and Other Essays* (Toronto, 1978), p. 62.
6. Richler, *Son of a Smaller Hero* (Toronto, reprinted 1969), p. 29.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
11. Richler, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (Markham, Ont., reprinted 1984).

12. *Son of a Smaller Hero*, p. 64, p. 169.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
17. Richler, *A Choice of Enemies* (London, reprinted 1982), p. 78.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 156-7.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
23. Loc. cit.
24. Richler, *Cocksure* (London, reprinted 1971), p. 86.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
26. Woodcock, *Mordecai Richler* (Toronto, 1970), p. 51.
27. *Cocksure*, p. 202.
28. Richler, *St. Urbain's Horseman* (Toronto, reprinted 1972), pp. 181-2.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 283.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 81, p. 288.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 287.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 384.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 350.
37. Richler, *Joshua Then and Now* (Toronto, reprinted 1984), p. 162.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
39. Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto, 1972), p. 191. Emphasis the author's.
40. *The Great Comic Book Heroes*, p. 106.