

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

*The Rotten People:*

Mordecai Richler's Seminal First Novel

by

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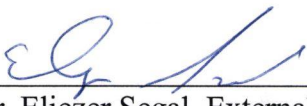
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THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY  
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## Abstract

*The Rotten People* is a seminal text in Canadian novelist Mordecai Richler's *oeuvre*. This unpublished novel contains the earliest examples of both thematic and technical qualities that are characteristic of the entire body of the author's work. Among the thematic concerns with roots in *The Rotten People* are the exploration of modern Jewish identity and the genre of the *Bildungsroman*. Richler's use of autobiographical material is also a prominent aspect of *The Rotten People*'s germinal nature. Among the technical characteristics that typify the author's novels are his use of set scenes, distinctive construction of narrative, use of scatological imagery and diction, and *penchant* for black humour. The presence of characters and incidents that reappear in later novels is another aspect of the text that holds considerable significance for critics. *The Rotten People* is an important text that offers substantial insight into the development of Richler's voice.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Victor J. Ramraj for his guidance; Apollonia Steele, head of the Special Collections at the University of Calgary Library for her invaluable help with the Richler Fonds; Dr. Richard C. Davis for his expertise in the murky waters of manuscript transcription; Daniel Richler for his enthusiasm toward my projects; my parents, Dr. Malcolm and Helen Munro, for their advice and support; and my wife, Catherine Munro, for her patience and encouragement.

## **Dedication**

Dedicated to the memory of the late Mordecai Richler, whose talent, wit, and intelligence are a constant inspiration to me. This thesis is less appetizing than a medium-fat smoked meat on rye from Schwartz's, and less satisfying than two fingers of Macallan's enjoyed with a Monte Cristo no. 2, but I hope that somewhere you are enjoying those delights as I toil in your shadow.

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## Introduction: Mordecai Richler's First Novel

*The Rotten People* is Mordecai Richler's first novel, and my thesis argues that the novel is a seminal work in the author's canon. Because it was never published, the literary community in Canada has not been exposed to *The Rotten People* in any form. The novel deserves recognition as the appropriate starting point for an inclusive study of the author's many novels, and my thesis is an initial step toward that end. *The Rotten People* is a unique lens for exploring the Richler *oeuvre*; many of the motifs and obsessions that characterize his fiction, such as the modern individual's moral and political responsibilities, and the *Bildungsroman*-esque influence of youthful experiences on the adult, have their earliest expression in this work. One central theme of *The Rotten People* that I believe merits close consideration is its treatment of Jewish identity, which Richler explored incessantly throughout his career; I attempt to compare the author's adolescent and his mature investigations of this issue. In addition to its thematic incubatory function, *The Rotten People* also contains the inception of Richler's most distinctive stylistic qualities, including his use of set pieces, black humour, colloquial language, masterfully constructed dialogue, and satirical subject matter. Furthermore, several incidents and passages in *The Rotten People* reappear in works such as *The Acrobats* (1954) and *The Street* (1969), and the plot of *Joshua Then and Now* (1980) closely resembles that of his first novel. These narrative features constitute yet another aspect of *The Rotten People*'s germinal nature, and I juxtapose the early and the mature presentations of these features in an effort to draw insight into the development of Richler's voice. In identifying these germinal thematic and formal characteristics, I argue

that at the least, *The Rotten People* offers substantial insight into the origins of the author's fiction.

Contextualizing *The Rotten People* in Richler's career helps to establish its importance in his canon. Richler was, at the time of his death in 2001, one of Canada's most esteemed novelists; his ten published novels, beginning with *The Acrobats* in 1954 and culminating with *Barney's Version* in 1997, have been recognized widely as among the most accomplished and consummate fiction by a Canadian author.<sup>1</sup> Works such as *St. Urbain's Horseman* (1971) and *Solomon Gursky Was Here* (1989) continue to receive international attention, and firmly establish the author as one of his generation's leading literary voices.<sup>2</sup> Despite this recognition, his *oeuvre* has arguably not been accorded the critical consideration that it deserves within his native country.<sup>3</sup> It is at this time, three years after his passing, that Canadian literary critics can begin the process of evaluating Richler's entire life's work and assessing its merits and weaknesses. This course of study must necessarily begin with the very roots of the author's career, with his earliest works of fiction. The history of this first novel, *The Rotten People*, is complex and fascinating; until very recently, the author's initial novel was assumed to be *The Acrobats*, a Hemingwayesque tale of love and loss in the years following the Spanish Civil War that was Richler's first published work of extended fiction. However, in 2002 a researcher in the Mordecai Richler Fonds at the University of Calgary, John Ayre, announced that he had recognized a novel that predates *The Acrobats*, a lengthy work that turned out to be *The Rotten People*.<sup>4</sup>

The only prior suggestion of this "lost" novel's existence came earlier in 2002, when Florence Richler (Mordecai's widow and literary executor) allowed publisher



McClelland & Stewart to print a new edition of *The Acrobats* following the author's death. This edition featured an afterword by Ted Kotcheff, Richler's life-long friend and the director of both of the film versions of his novels (*The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *Joshua Then and Now*). Kotcheff surprised Richler devotees with his assertion that

Although *The Acrobats* was Mordecai's first published novel, it was not his first novel – something I discovered in the early sixties. Mordecai and I shared a flat in Swiss Cottage, London. ... Sitting in the living room was a half-size metal steamer trunk. ... It belonged to Mordecai, so I never inquired about its contents. Mordecai moved out ... [and] shortly afterwards, the house was demolished to make way for a swimming bath.

Some years later, Mordecai came to me and asked where that steamer trunk was. The University of Calgary was buying all his papers and correspondence and the trunk had his first novel in it and some early short stories. ... We searched our premises and our memories, but what happened to it was a total mystery – a mystery that was never solved. After reproaching him for never telling me what was in it, I asked what the novel was about, but he said it was not worth talking about, dismissing it as a poor adolescent effort. ("Afterword," *Acrobats* 222)

Although Kotcheff had alluded to the existence of *The Rotten People* in his afterword, the Canadian literary community was understandably surprised by John Ayre's announcement that this mysterious novel had actually resurfaced. In addition to his status in the literary academy as an accomplished intellectual writer, Richler was also

a highly popular and controversial public figure, and the publicity surrounding *The Rotten People* was immediate and intense. However, as quickly and unexpectedly as it arose, this publicity faded. The general consensus among the few individuals who had actually read the text and participated in the public discourse regarding its worth was that the novel is a poorly executed, youthful effort with little literary value beyond the amusement of Richlerites who want to see what the author wrote like before he developed his skills.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the merit or demerit of the novel as an aesthetic document, it is much more than just a text to amuse Richler's fans. *The Rotten People* is in fact, as I have noted, a significant manuscript for the critical study of the antecedents of Richler's mature fiction. However negative the author's own opinion of the novel was, the resurfacing of this text surely marks a new stage in the study of the development of his life's work.

The text survives in two drafts: a working typescript with extensive handwritten authorial interjections, and a clean copy in which the interjections have been integrated organically into the prose. We will likely never know if Richler considered the clean copy a final draft, but given the fact that he abandoned the novel in favour of *The Acrobats*, it seems likely that he was dissatisfied with his progress and rejected the early text as unlikely to be published. In fact, Michael Posner's recently published oral biography of the author quotes Richler saying that his "various inscrutable intellectual" friends advised him that "the conventional publishers won't read past page three" (70) of *The Rotten People*, probably because of its unconventional style and shocking scatological content. Richler in his later years also made no secret that he was embarrassed by his early novels, including *The Acrobats*, which he "cunningly kept out

of print” for the duration of his career after its initial publication (*Broadsides* 5).

Richler’s embarrassment toward his first novels is not entirely unwarranted, for though *The Rotten People* is of substantial significance for literary critics, its quality is uneven and its prose unpolished, and enamoured readers of the author’s mature fiction would likely be disappointed with its overall execution.

Despite these weaknesses, *The Rotten People* is a novel of uncommon range and aspiration, particularly for a nineteen-year-old author.<sup>6</sup> It is by considering these fine qualities that critics can discover how Richler evolved into his remarkable mature authorship. In 1970, George Woodcock perceptively wrote of Richler’s first published novel that

It is not that *The Acrobats* is lacking in the themes and preoccupations which one now recognizes as characteristic of Richler. It is rather that in this first novel Richler has not yet gained the assurance, and the sense of his own style, that detach a writer from the stereotypes of his age. It is ... a very derivative book, in which the writer is still casting about for a new direction. (17)

Over thirty years later, this retrospective statement is even more germane and applies with equal relevance to *The Rotten People*; comparisons between *The Acrobats* or *The Rotten People* and any of the fully realized later fictions display the remarkable evolution from the young writer into his mature counterpart. However, it is the presence of the “themes and preoccupations” which ever remain at the forefront of our image of the novelist in *The Rotten People* that is of primary concern in my thesis. Not only is the novel germinal in theme and motif, but also in technical execution and stylistic voice.

Undeniably, the author's voice in his mature fiction is far more penetrating, confident, and distinctive in its implementation of narrative and exploration of theme, but we will recognize the basis of Richler's strengths in this initial work, though it is undeniably his least realized novel.

The subject material of *The Rotten People* is also somewhat at odds with the author's later works. It is clear that this is a text produced during the period when Richler says that he was "scornful of my own natural material, St. Urbain Street, considering it far too commonplace for fiction" (*Broadsides* 5). The negative effect of this scorn for the mundane life of Jewish Montréal that ultimately became his richest vein of material is readily apparent when one first reads *The Rotten People*. Aesthetically, the text suffers as a result of the author's reluctance to embrace his "natural material," as the novel displays none of the verisimilitude that characterizes his Montréal books, and instead relies upon Kafkaesque depictions of post-war London and Paris to shock and disgust its readers rather than entertain or enlighten them. Also, at this early stage in Richler's career, the author seems rather desperate to imbue his characters with worldliness and sophistication. The men and women in *The Rotten People* pontificate incessantly about art, ideology, and philosophical abstractions, and the text is peppered with far-ranging literary and cultural allusions which seem pretentious from such a young and unaccomplished novelist.<sup>7</sup> Larry Zolf notes that, in Richler's early novels, there is "a tendency, at times, to view us provincial Canadians with the lofty disdain of the profligate, world-weary sophisticate" (115). Despite this disdain, the affected sophistication of the text's characters indicates the author's earnest desire to write a novel of intellectual significance. The wild, often audacious stylistic experimentations that young Richler

employs seem rather more outlandish than ground-breaking, but again this flaw suggests a determination to be innovative and inventive instead of writing yet another treatment of the familiar young man's novel.

It is the stylistic inventiveness that contributes the most entertaining and unusual aspects of the novel. Canadian literature in the 1950s was not noted for its *avant-garde* Modernist experimentation.<sup>8</sup> *The Rotten People* was completed in 1951, the same year that Robertson Davies published his first novel, *Tempest-Tost*, which began the series of trilogies that arguably garnered the first substantial international recognition of Canadian authors. It is difficult to imagine two novels more widely divergent in both style and theme than *Tempest-Tost* and *The Rotten People*. Davies's novel celebrates Canadian provincality<sup>9</sup>, while Richler's consciously avoids references to Canada's unsophisticated masses; Davies asserts almost Victorian notions of propriety, while Richler revels in gruesome scatology and graphic sexuality; Davies's complex narratives and orotund style frequently evoke comparisons to British figures such as Trollope and Dickens,<sup>10</sup> while in Richler's nightmarish imagery, controversial subject matter, and romantic descriptions, I detect a clear debt to European and American Modernists such as Franz Kafka, Louis Ferdinand Céline, and Ernest Hemingway.

These pronounced thematic and stylistic discrepancies suggest much about the late-blooming emergence of Richler as a distinctly Canadian voice. Commenting on the literary culture of his youth, Richler noted that Davies and the few other prominent Canadian authors of the day wrote "firmly within the British tradition" ("Maple Leaf" 19), and therefore did not provide an attractive or distinctively Canadian model to emulate. *The Rotten People* reveals Richler taking his first steps toward becoming what

he called “a Jewish writer, ... a Canadian writer, but above all ... a serious writer” (21), but in order to avoid being merely another emulator of British literature, he felt that those steps had to be *away* from Canadian authors who wrote about Canadian themes. Instead, his first novels, as I mentioned, trace the footsteps of American and European writers, whom he apparently considered more innovative and dynamic than their pseudo-British Canadian counterparts.

This emulation of the Modernists, though entertaining and compelling, does not reveal Richler at his best, and the reader senses the author’s awareness of his own limitations. In *The Rotten People*, Richler expresses his frustration at being unable to find his voice by imitating Hemingway and Céline through the protagonist Kerman Adler, who complains that, “Seriously, I keep thinking there must be – has to be – something else besides coming to Paris and wearing dirty clothes, growing a beard and writing your autobiography... All the interesting and sensitive people in this town give me one long pain in the ass. Christ ... there has to be something else, something better” (21). Kerman is closely identified with Richler throughout the text (*The Rotten People* was indeed written in Paris), and this statement suggests that the author was acutely conscious of the boundaries of his undeveloped voice. Richler’s exasperation explodes again in a tirade against contemporary literature, where Kerman rages that

This is the age of symbolism – honest art has gone by the boards. It isn’t sufficient for the artist any more to be simply a commentator on life, to squeeze the hell out of experience and mold form to it – that’s journalism. What’s needed today aren’t novels, but weird fairy tales (preferably

written by homosexuals) with a few good symbolic castrations in them.

(90)

Unsatisfied with the “age of symbolism” that banished “honest art” to a marginal role, Richler apparently attempted to produce the weirdest of all “fairy tales” in *The Rotten People*. It was years before Richler returned to the city and people of his youth for inspiration, but once he did his art improved immeasurably; as he puts it, “I had to force two more novels through the hothouse before I found a voice of my own and wrote *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, for which the pillars of Montreal’s Jewish community have never forgiven me” (*Broadsides* 5).

The lesson that Richler learned, that the author is best advised to concentrate on his “natural material” if he wishes to produce effective literature even at the cost of ostracizing himself from his own people, would be of great value to *The Rotten People*’s Kerman Adler. The novel suggests that running away from one’s roots is a very hazardous endeavour, and one that is unlikely to bring about the desired resolution of self-realization. Kerman fails utterly in his attempts to reconcile his various personal, psychological, and social conflicts, and the novel is at times a thoroughly disturbing and depressing one. This melancholy tone is almost wholly absent from his later, more successful novels, which are predominantly comic in tone even as they deliver piercing social indictments and satirical condemnations; critic Arnold Davidson refers to the “pervasive tone of comic social criticism” (181) of the later novels. Nonetheless, *The Rotten People* is truly Richler’s first novel, both in the literal, temporal sense and also in the metaphorical sense of forming a seed which contains the stylistic, narrative, and thematic germs of his later work.

My thesis explores *The Rotten People*'s germinal quality through three chapters that progress from thematic issues to formal concerns. Another thesis might examine the novel from a more theoretically intensive perspective, and consider the author's motivations and preoccupations in his iterative re-writing of *The Rotten People*'s tale. Influential critics have spent considerable energy in analyzing literary writers' incentives for re-writing texts and revisiting earlier themes. For instance, Edward Said writes in "On Originality" that since "the writer thinks less of writing originally, and more of re-writing, the image of writing changes from *original inscription* to parallel script, from tumbled-out confidence to deliberate fathering-forth" (135), an insight that could be brought to bear on Richler's palimpsestical treatments of the themes that I identify above.

Another pertinent critical perspective with some relevance to *The Rotten People*'s relationship toward Richler's later works is the complex theory that Harold Bloom articulates in his 1973 book *The Anxiety of Influence*. Bloom's theory proposes that the literature of poets and novelists displays anxiety towards earlier works that they feel prefigure or engender their own, an anxiety that manifests in aggression and apprehension. Richler's apparent embarrassment toward his earliest novels does not specifically fall into this category of anxiety because they are his own creations and not that of an influential forebear, but we could characterize his anxiety as one of antecedence. The author cyclically re-writes his own first novel throughout his career in an effort to perfect it and satisfy his aspirations of quality. This preoccupation with perfecting certain thematic representations in his novels is also related to the postcolonial literary concept of "writing back," wherein authors display confrontational attitudes toward other works that misrepresent, appropriate or abrogate cultural or intellectual



properties in what is perceived to be an inappropriate, offensive, or unsatisfactory manner.<sup>11</sup> But these theoretical perspectives hold only tenuous significance for Richler and his first novel. It is my contention in this thesis that this unpublished manuscript must first be examined in a less intensively theoretical manner before it can be fit into the broad, sometimes oversimplifying context of literary theory. Accordingly, my thesis focuses on identifying and delineating *The Rotten People*'s formal characteristics and thematic representations rather than theoretical analysis of the text.

The first chapter of this thesis is devoted wholly to *The Rotten People*'s exploration of Jewish identity, which is the most important and remarkably rendered motif in the text, and one that inarguably preoccupied the author throughout his career. This opening chapter compares the treatment of Jewish identity in the early novel with its examination in *Joshua Then and Now*, one of Richler's most successful and complex novels. The second chapter examines characteristics of Richler's construction of narrative, of which *The Rotten People* is the first example. This chapter pays particular emphasis to the thematic frameworks that inform his construction of plot and to his extensive use of autobiographical material. It also juxtaposes scenes and characters in *The Rotten People* that prefigure later fictional presentations with related examples drawn from Richler's mature period. The third chapter is concerned with the stylistic qualities of *The Rotten People*, including its use of set pieces, black humour, and colloquialism, and the manner in which they develop into the distinctive and confident style of Richler at the peak of his powers, represented by works such as *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959), *St. Urbain's Horseman*, and *Solomon Gursky Was Here*. A concluding chapter summarizes and interprets these arguments and suggests fruitful avenues for

future research into the novel. In deference to readers who lack convenient access to Richler's papers in the University of Calgary library, I have included an appendix of a brief transcribed excerpt of *The Rotten People* manuscript.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> At a recent literary conference at McGill University, leading Canadianist Frank Davey, whose “criticism is among the most individual and influential ever written in Canada” (*OCCL* 276), described the author as “unquestionably one of most accomplished writers Canada has produced.”

<sup>2</sup> *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* describes Richler as “One of the foremost authors of his generation” (1000).

<sup>3</sup> This argument was the focus of McGill University’s symposium, “The Richler Challenge,” in March 2004.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, The Calgary Herald’s September 17th 2002 front-page article by Sean Myers, “Lost Richler manuscript surfaces at U of C library” (A1).

<sup>5</sup> See again the above cited Calgary Herald article.

<sup>6</sup> In a letter to the author, Florence Richler and her son Daniel convey their disappointment that the “rare scope, maturity, and ambition” of the novel were not recognized by John Ayre and the others who publicly discussed the novel.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, the philosophic and artistic discussions between Kerman Adler, Barney Larkin, Frank Hoover and other expatriates in the set scene entitled “The Party at Frank’s Place” (57-84). As Nathan Cohen notes, “his characters invariably ask one another about God at cocktail parties. Unfortunately, [Richler’s] determination to make significant remarks is forever interfering with his craftsmanship and getting in his characters’ way” (53).

<sup>8</sup> Contemporary Canadian novelists such as Robertson Davies, Hugh MacLennan, and W.O. Mitchell wrote firmly within a traditional mode.

<sup>9</sup> *Tempest-Tost* focuses on the misadventurous production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* by a circle of small-town Ontarian academics and actors, and affectionately lampoons their pretensions and amateurism.

<sup>10</sup> *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, for example, notes Davies's fondness for and emulation of Trollope and Dickens (279).

<sup>11</sup> Creative works that "write back" include Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a re-write of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which reinterprets Brontë's *Jane Eyre*; critics that theorize "writing back" include Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak.

## Chapter One –

### Exploring Jewish Identity in Mordecai Richler's Fiction: *The Rotten People* and *Joshua Then and Now*

The dominant, omnipresent thematic concern of *The Rotten People* is the challenge of life as a post-Holocaust Jew. The novel is a germinal work in this regard because the theme recurs ceaselessly in Richler's *oeuvre*.<sup>1</sup> Throughout *The Rotten People*, the protagonist Kerman Adler questions, accepts, rejects, and challenges incessantly his notions of what it is to be Jewish, particularly in the historical and cultural context of the post-Holocaust Europe through which he travels. This obsessive self-reflection is one of the factors that contribute to Kerman's eventual loss of sanity. In *Joshua Then and Now*, written some thirty years after *The Rotten People*, Richler draws extensively on his early character study of Kerman, the youthful Jew in the Europe of the 1950s, to construct his more complex and sophisticated depiction of Joshua Shapiro, the protagonist of the later novel. Both characters travel to Europe in search of resolutions, and though the conflicts prompting these journeys differ, both men discover more about their Jewish heritage than they expected to find. *Joshua Then and Now* displays the same anxiety and ambivalence, and the same challenging introspective flight of the author's first novel, but in a more stylistically mature and satirically tolerant manner.

The aspects of Jewish identity that Richler's protagonists attempt so incessantly (and unsuccessfully) to reconcile and understand spring largely from their status as Jews who, though "not having gone like sheep to the slaughterhouse" (*St Urbain's Horseman* 308) in the Holocaust, were nonetheless profoundly influenced by that catastrophic event. Essentially, Richler's explorations of Jewish identity focus on the modern Jew's reactions

to the Holocaust and the possibility or impossibility of reconciling the horror of that knowledge with the need to function in the broader social sphere of predominantly Gentile society. Rachel Feldhay Brenner concisely characterizes the author's treatment of Jewish identity:

Richler reveals the predicament of today's Jewish individual: mistrust of liberal ideals inhibits integration into Gentile society, whereas fear of victimization prompts denial of bonds with ethnic heritage. Richler's work reveals inability to resolve the conflict between the wish to assimilate and the desire to assert Jewish identity. The resolution is forever elusive; the spectre of the Holocaust seems to have irrevocably destroyed hope for trusting relations between the Jew and the Gentile. (ix)

Thus, as Kerman Adler and Joshua Shapiro leave their safe and secure homes in North America and encounter post war Europe, the theatre of the genocide, the long history of their people's persecution raises questions and emotions that they are largely unable to answer or understand. The evolution of Richler's treatment of the problems of modern Jewish identity that occurs between his first and eighth novels reveals a progression from uncontrollable anger to a more objective and reasoned analysis of life as a modern Jew, though neither novel offers a concrete resolution to the identity problems that Brenner identifies.

Both novels centre on journeys of the type that Brenner characterizes as typical of the author's work: "Metaphorically, the journeys that Richler's Jewish protagonists undertake become the quest for the resolution of their conflicting emotional needs. ... Invariably, the journey ... fails to provide a definite answer to his existential problem in

the post-Holocaust world” (113). Joshua, a middle-aged Jew, is haunted by certain memories of his youth in Europe, particularly in Ibiza, the same Spanish island where Kerman Adler strives to regain control of his downward spiral into lunacy.

Psychologically, thematically, and even geographically, Joshua’s story mirrors and expands the portrait of Kerman Adler and his burgeoning Jewish consciousness; when juxtaposed, the two novels reveal significant parallels in their description of the Jewish figure’s struggle to construct and accept his religious and ethnic identity.

Early in *The Rotten People*, Richler indirectly introduces us to Kerman’s recurring identity problem: his inability to integrate his Jewishness successfully into his psyche. Kerman, we are led to believe through his unrelenting nightmares, paranoia about rats in his hotel room, and dread of receiving letters from his mother in North America, has come to Europe to escape something – what, we do not yet know. However, various clues to the nature and cause of his unease gradually surface. The first clue comes in a conversation with his communist friend Barney Larkin. Discussing with Barney the potential repercussions of another major war in Europe, Kerman first makes mention of his Jewish family back home and reveals that his father may have been a black-market profiteer during World War Two. “I’ve decided we might as well have another war and get it over with,” suggests Kerman sarcastically. “Christ, my father was broke in ’39 and look at him now. His warehouse is jammed with goods and if we don’t have another war soon he’ll go broke again” (35). If Kerman’s father was “broke in ’39” at the onset of World War Two but is now affluent, with a “warehouse ... jammed with goods,” apparently the Jewish patriarch enjoyed prosperity at home during the war which decimated European Jewry. Kerman’s comment indicates his concern with his role as a

Canadian Jew and the relationship that he holds to the European victims of the Holocaust, and foreshadows the inner conflict that will eventually drive him mad. The young Jew's sarcastic, offhand comment about the benefits his father reaped while fellow Jews were being systematically slaughtered in Europe, and the flippant manner with which he downplays the seriousness of an impending conflict, are characteristic of his response to serious issues in the novel. Richler effectively demonstrates the young Jew Kerman's immaturity and unwillingness to deal with his ethnic relationship directly; repeatedly, Kerman responds with sarcasm and black humour to confrontations with the inner demons that drove him to Europe.

The protagonist's friends recognize and chide him about this immature evasion of his troubles. Frustrated by Kerman's avoidance of the root causes of his baseless paranoia about rats, Molly, another North American Jewish expatriate, accuses that he is attempting to deny his ethnic identity: "As much as you'd like to forget it, Mr. Smart guy," states Molly, "let me remind you that you're a Jew too" (36). Molly's assertion that he would "like to forget" his religious identity affects Kerman, and we are taken closer to the actual cause of his neuroses: "Kerman was helpless with laughter, but it was forced now, because Molly's crack about his being a Jew aroused old feelings of guilt" (36). Kerman's response to the accusation, forced laughter, is another example of his evasive immaturity. Unable or unwilling to confront the mysterious past that drove him to Europe, a past charged with shame and "old feelings of guilt," Kerman represses the memories that haunt him and avoids his guiltiness by laughing them away. Here Richler again offers us clues to Kerman's past, and adds emphasis to the theme of his "guilt." Why, we ask, does Kerman feel guilty, and what relation does his guilt have to his



Jewishness? Is he ashamed of being Jewish, and if so, why? We have been informed of his father's possibly unscrupulous business practices, but could that be the sole cause of Kerman's shame?

Richler provides further insight into these questions in Kerman's first direct examination of his Jewish identity. The stylistic qualities of this passage are characteristic of the author's undeveloped management of his characters in this first novel, but the thematic resonance of Kerman's inner monologue continued to preoccupy Richler throughout his career, and thus cannot be ignored on the basis of their imperfect style. The sheer directness of Kerman's futile inner efforts to incorporate his Jewishness into his self-image, although somewhat contrived, contrasts well with his external evasion of the problem:

It troubled him that people thought he made any effort to conceal his being a Jew. A long time ago, after witnessing the sad collapse of many friends for being too self-consciously Jewish, either by extending themselves in an effort to renounce their Judaism, or by being so defiantly Jewish that they couldn't enter a room without proclaiming their pedigree, Kerman had decided he wouldn't allow his being a Jew ruin his life, that he would be indifferent, unemotional, and accept things as they were. After all, anti-Semitism was only another of many social injustices. Yet here it was, cropping up again, again and again, always with a nagging persistency. ... For days the enigma of being a Jew would revolve over and over in his mind like a globe swirling in a whirlpool. Then, the globe finally being

tossed up into a subterfuge, he would return to the very conclusions he started out with on the whole preamble. (38-39)

Clearly, for Kerman the weight of his Jewish identity is an enormous burden; he has witnessed the “sad collapse” of others who strove too hard to reconcile the “enigma of being a Jew,” and this experience has prompted him to adopt an air of indifferent acceptance. However, he finds himself unable to “accept things as they were” because, “again, again and again,” his Jewishness incessantly obtrudes upon him, shattering his resolve. Richler effectively creates sympathy for the troubled young Jew by showing us his desperate inadequacy to handle these obtrusions, and we are consequently disposed to commiserate with him when this desperation manifests itself in his neurotic nightmares of rats and decay. Running away from his Jewish past has not helped young Kerman to understand or accept his troubled ethnicity, nor has he escaped it – in Brenner’s words, he has not yet found a “resolution [to his] conflicting emotional needs” (113).

The inescapable image of the gnawing rats, which Richler found effective enough to include in his next novel (*The Acrobats*), is soon tied overtly to Kerman’s Semitic anxiety. When he openly makes the metaphorical connection between rodents and Jews, Kerman anticipates the as yet unstated anti-Semitic stereotypes of his people as a parasitic drain on society that recurs later in the novel. Forced to acknowledge consciously the roots of his neurosis in a conversation with yet another expatriate Jew, Kerman reacts with puerile frustration: “‘And the Lord said unto Moses: And the rats shall inherit the earth.’ And you know what Moses, the Jew bastard, said? Yeah, he said, sure, but what’s going to happen to the clothing business?” (51). By substituting “the meek” with “the rats” in the biblical passage Matthew 5, Richler links Kerman’s image of

his people with the vermin that chase him throughout his troubled life. Similarly, Kerman's characterization of Moses, the Jewish savior, as "the Jew bastard" clearly establishes his negative estimation of his people. Once again, Kerman invokes the pejorative image of Jews as solely concerned with money and business that was introduced with the image of his father as a wartime profiteer, and again, Richler's protagonist reacts with childish sarcasm, unconcealed anger, and now racial humour. This quotation also introduces the narrative technique of profaning sacred Jewish teachings with vulgar dialogue, which Richler effectively uses in the following passage.

Kerman's decision to flee his troubled Jewish childhood in Canada by coming to Europe was certainly a bad choice; the long history of Jewish persecution in Europe is a palpable undercurrent in the text.<sup>2</sup> Richler returns to this ghastly history with greater scrutiny and more fully developed historical analysis in *Joshua Then and Now*, but *The Rotten People* assumes of the reader a background knowledge of anti-Semitic pogroms and the Nazi Holocaust. The Holocaust resurfaces continually in Kerman's anguished internal conflicts, and he remains profoundly affected by its horror until the dénouement of his recognition of insanity. Unable to integrate his Jewish heritage into his identity, he is consequently unable to receive comfort from his people's teachings, or to reconcile the unspeakable atrocities of the Second World War with the apparently platitudinous promises of Jewish lore. Unsatisfied with the religious philosophy of his people, Kerman viciously mocks the inadequate rationalizations of Rabbis and their holy texts:

The Talmud...

Not one thing has God created in vain. He created the snail as a  
remedy for a blister; the fly for the sting of the wasp; the gnat for the bite

of the serpent; the serpent itself for healing the itch; and the lizard for healing the sting of the scorpion.

This God is a real bright guy but what in the name of shit did he create the Jews for? The wrath of the Gentiles? ...

As it is impossible for the world to be without air, so also it is impossible for the world to be without Israel.

Give or take a few million bars of soap here or there. (208-09)

Here, the young author interjects devastating sarcastic commentaries into his protagonist's memories of Jewish education. A nearly identical commentary appears in *Son of a Smaller Hero* (published just three years after *The Rotten People* was written), where two Jewish patriarchs debate their people's status: "Chosen. You tell me what for we were chosen. Soap? Furnaces?" (77). Stylistically, *The Rotten People's* juxtaposition of gutter profanity with the lofty, elevated tone of the Talmudic teaching is jarring and lends emphasis to Richler's attack. Thematically, Kerman's inexpressible revulsion toward the Nazis manifests in anger toward his own people, the victims of the persecution, and their God. The association of the Jews with rats in the preceding quotation here finds new relevance as we are invited to remember that the Nazis' genocide, "the wrath of the Gentiles," was fueled by propaganda that likened Jews to vermin and parasites in Germany. Kerman's inability to accept his Jewish heritage results in the metaphorical appearance of gnawing rats; as the Jews were persecuted as vermin, so the repressed knowledge of the unacknowledged multitudes of persecuted Jews gnaws at Kerman as a consequence of his rejected heritage.

Kerman's refusal to embrace his ethnicity raises the issue, which will also resurface with greater complexity in *Joshua Then and Now*, of Jewish assimilation into the Gentile world. "An important thing to remember at all Zionist and B'nai Brith meetings," states Kerman, "and when a Rabbi with a mouthful of pus and Old Testament axioms crawls into the pulpit, is this: IF THE JEWS HAD ASSIMILATED 2,000 YEARS AGO, 7,000,000 SOULS WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN BURNT" (213). The disgusting portrait of the grotesque Rabbi "with a mouthful of pus and Old Testament axioms" is another instance of Kerman's transferred aggression resulting from his inability to understand or accept the fate of so many of his people. His incredulity at the persistence of Jewish culture in the face of centuries of overwhelming persecution becomes misplaced aggression toward the Rabbi who seemingly misleads his people in their belief that they are God's chosen people: "Nobody dares ask chosen for what" (207), Kerman snipes. The emphatically capitalized endorsement of Jewish assimilation into the Gentile world suggests that Kerman feels that by refusing to abandon their faith, the Jews have actually contributed to the horrors that they suffer. The ignominious process of assimilation, which Kerman himself has partially accepted by refusing to be "defiantly Jewish" and instead "accept things as they were" (38) seems attractive when compared to the Holocaust. Because he refuses to assert or even accept his own Jewishness, Kerman is angered by those Jews whose unwillingness to refute their faith and ethnicity contributed to the ghastly cultural inheritance that for him is such an unbearable burden. In this regard, Kerman closely prefigures the character of Joshua Shapiro in Richler's later novel.

True to the exuberant, youthful energy that characterizes the work as a whole, *The Rotten People*'s examinations of Semitic identity are strongly worded, direct, and often intentionally shocking. In one such instance, Kerman repeatedly demands of himself and other characters the answer to the question "What is a Jew?" (214). The young Richler, in an early display of the controversial scrutiny of his own people that became a hallmark of his reputation for "debunking the myths of his culture" ("Richler, Mordecai" 1000), unleashes through Kerman's stream of consciousness an emotional tirade against the hypocrisy of Jews and anti-Semites alike. This five-page discourse on the nature and shortcomings of Jewishness and the roots of anti-Semitism is a microcosm of the novel's treatment of Jewish identity: it is impassioned, blackly humorous, and satirical, and also lacks resolution in the manner that Brenner defines. In search of a simple, unbiased definition of what it is to be a Jew, Kerman considers the opinions of various social, political, and religious groups. The opening paragraph of the segment launches a salvo against the ingrained anti-Semitism of Western culture, as represented by academia:

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* which is a digest of the 2 volume *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* which is the companion to a still larger academic monstrosity of umpteen volumes says, quote,

Jew<sup>1</sup>, n. Person of Hebrew race; (transf., colloq.) extortionate usurer, driver of hard bargains; *rich as a jew*; *unbelieving jew* (incredulous person); *tell that to the jews* (an unlikely tale); Jew<sup>2</sup>, v.t. (colloq.), cheat, overreach.

unquote. So much for the ultra-objective bible of sterile academics in England and America and all the ships at sea. (207)

The appearance of derogatory terms such as “extortionate usurer” and “incredulous person” in the “ultra-objective bible of sterile academics” is, for Kerman, irrefutable evidence of the prejudice of English and American society as a whole. Richler, in *The Rotten People*, examines issues directly and issues sarcastic judgements upon those whom he sees as worthy of scorn; in his later fiction, he handles the same issues at a distance, allowing his characters to react to situations without overtly commenting through the narrative voice, and integrating whatever conclusions they reach more organically into his narrative.

Structurally, *The Rotten People* and *Joshua Then and Now* are rather divergent; the latter novel’s use of humorous flashbacks to formative family incidents has replaced the more conventional, linear timeline that characterizes the earlier work. Joel Yanofsky notes that “The later novels [are] structured differently – built on flashbacks and the interplay of an idealized past and a hardhearted present. Richler’s early novels, culminating with *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* seldom look back. They are mainly forward momentum” (195). Despite this structural difference, the two novels share many thematic motifs. In *Joshua Then and Now*, Joshua Shapiro also ponders the importance of his ethnic identity, and the protagonist’s Jewish identity crisis also thrusts itself upon him when he attempts to escape or deny his inner demons. Like Kerman, Joshua finds that in Europe “once more his Jewishness obtruded. Descending on him unbidden. Like a press” (191); he “had come to Spain to look at battlefields, talk to survivors, learn what he could about the Spanish Civil War. Instead, he was discovering that he was Jewish” (221). The obtrusion of Joshua’s ethnicity into his daily life, “descending on him unbidden,” is a correlation to his youthful precursor’s attempt to

outrun his psychological inability to understand his ethnicity, and characterizes both novels' treatment of Jewish identity. In this sense, *The Rotten People* is a germinal novel that anticipates *Joshua Then and Now*. Joshua is also running to Europe to escape troubles at home, this time in the form of a public sex scandal and the consequent mental breakdown of his beloved wife. Richler reaches the same discomfiting conclusion in this novel as in his first that life for the modern Jew is fraught with ambivalences, dilemmas, and conflicting emotions.

In the following quotation, Richler introduces some of the thematic strings that confound Joshua's ability to understand his Jewishness, much like Kerman. However, here Richler displays what has been described as "his tendency to mock and at the same time accommodate human shortcomings" (Ramraj 1) and the "more compassionate, courageous" tone of his later novels (Yanofsky 285), whereas in the first novel there is abundant mockery but little accommodation. This "more compassionate" voice presents a character with a more reasoned and objective perspective on his people's history, a perspective less focused on the debilitating negativity that drives Kerman Adler to insanity. The focus in *Joshua Then and Now* shifts from the outright anger and hostility towards Jews and anti-Semites of *The Rotten People* toward a multifaceted exploration of modern Jewish life, an exploration that in its literary treatment includes a much greater emphasis on characterization and humour than the earlier novel affords. The mature author does however utilize the same formal elements and subject material that he uses in his germinal novel: coarse diction, suggestions of the prejudice of Jews themselves, and invocations of repressed Jewish shame.



Rather than shocking us as he did in *The Rotten People*, Richler now chooses to amuse us through the absurd but endearing wisdom of Joshua's father Reuben Shapiro, whom Arnold Davidson considers "the author's most successful comic creation" (171).<sup>3</sup> In a didactic conversation with his young son Joshua, Reuben delineates the difficulties of being a Jew:

"... now we are going to concentrate on the Jewish tradition. Now, to come clean," [Reuben] said jauntily, "I'm not very Jewish."

"What do you mean, 'not very'? Either you are or you aren't."

"Boy, are you ever ignorant. Take the niggers for instance. They come in all shades from coal-black, through shit-brown, like Sugar Ray, to just a touch of the tan. Well, it's the same with the Hebes. Like, if you're very Jewish, you wear one of those crazy fur hats and sidecurls and a beard. You know the type. But me, I was just born a Hebe like some guys come into this world with a club foot or a stammer."

"Hey, you make it sound like it was a real disadvantage."

"Well, yeah. Right. We're not very popular." (196-97)

In this passage, Reuben feels compelled to "come clean" about the fact that he's "not very Jewish," unlike the "very Jewish" who wear "crazy fur hats and sidecurls." The confessional, "come clean" tone of this revelation, the use of words such as "crazy," and the comparison between being Jewish and being born with "a clubfoot or stammer" all imply a certain embarrassment on Reuben's part at his Jewish identity, or lack thereof. However, unlike Kerman's ashamed, unsubtle statement that "he hates to admit" that he "once wanted to forget" (213) he is a Jew, Reuben gently introduces Joshua to the fact

that Jews are “not very popular.” Also unlike Kerman, Joshua does not attempt to ignore or forget his father’s questionable business practises (Reuben is a strong man for a local gangster) and muddled messages of Jewish faith, but instead draws upon them as a source of strength when the weight of his Jewishness descends. The mature Richler, revisiting the anticipatory themes of his first novel, now organically evokes the same uncertainties of Jewish identity in a more subtle and indirect manner than *The Rotten People’s* mechanical statements convey.

Similarly, in *Joshua Then and Now*, the author paints a more subtle and accepting portrait of the prejudice of the modern Jew than in the earlier text. While Kerman’s diatribe bashes the reader over the head with his imaginary Jew’s assertion that “The niggers, the Jews say, are so goddamn lazy. And filthy! They never wash” (212), Richler conveys Reuben’s prejudice indirectly through an analogy between Jews and African Americans: “Boy, are you ever ignorant,” he admonishes his son, “Take the niggers...” (196). The obvious contradiction of Reuben’s words, the irony of a man chiding his son’s ignorance while using racial epithets about “niggers” who are “coal-black” and “shit-brown,” invites the reader to recognize this Jew’s own ignorance and prejudice without resorting to the unsubtleties of Kerman’s tirade. The humorous passages that describe Reuben’s “religious education” (197) of his son invite laughter rather than the outrage that Kerman Adler induces. As Davidson remarks, “Reuben regularly voices the kind of twisted home truth that has been, since Shakespeare, the hallmark of the wise fool” (171). In this sense, *Joshua Then and Now* continues the criticism of Richler’s own people’s faults that commence in his seminal first novel, but his satiric prose has become critical by indirection, and now lacks the accusatory feel of

the younger work. The indirect criticism, because it meshes more organically with the narrative and dialogue of the later novel, is the more effective mode.

Another instance of Richler's continuing criticism of the Jewish community is found in his two approaches to the Old Testament and sacred Jewish texts. When the mature author criticizes the "myths of his culture," the criticism is accomplished through humour rather than antagonism. Once again, Reuben the wise fool conveys the criticism humourously and with tolerance. Teaching Joshua the story of Abraham and his sacrificial son Isaac, Reuben draws our attention to what he perceives as the dubious morality of the text:

"Quote, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven, and as the sand which is on the sea shore, blah blah blah, unquote. Now we've got this covenant with God, time-honoured, and going on forever and ever. Those are the terms and they're very stiff, I don't mind telling you. But ... if I had to sign on the dotted line today, I don't know that I would. God's always needling, testing, his wrath waxing hot. He's a real blowhard ... I don't care for such types." (86)

As in the earlier novel, Richler again uses the technique of interjecting coarse, vernacular commentary ("blah blah blah") into the exalted prose of the Old Testament in order to suggest the tenuous relevance of ancient law to modern times. But in the place of *The Rotten People's* sarcastic profaning of the sacred, here Richler more effectively uses Reuben to make the criticism humourous, describing God as "a real blowhard,"

expressing his disapproval of the Jewish moral code as “very stiff,” and conveying his distrust of Jehovah through the moderate criticism, “I don’t care for such types.” By replacing Kerman Adler’s puerile anger (“what in the name of shit...”) and overstated mockery (“rabbi with a mouthful of pus...”) with the absurdity and “twisted home truth” (Davidson) of Reuben’s informal dissertation, Richler encourages a more reasoned and tolerant response to the criticism. The shock is gone; the emphasis is now on the story’s narrative and its characters rather than its ideological concerns; the author’s perceived shortcomings of the Jewish tradition are accommodated.

Richler, as I mention earlier, also treats the concept of Jewish assimilation in a decidedly more measured and complex manner in *Joshua Then and Now* than in his first novel. Like his precursor Kerman Adler, Joshua is himself, to some degree, an assimilated Jew; he also dislikes being associated with what Kerman calls the “defiantly Jewish” (38). Joshua’s ambivalent Jewish identity, at once proud and ashamed, is well articulated when he remarks that “he sometimes felt as if he were condemned to lope slope-shouldered through this world that confused him ... groaning under the weight of his Jewish heritage (burnings on the market square, crazed Cossacks on the rampage, gas chambers, as well as Moses, Rabbi Akiba, and Maimonides)” (190-91). The dualistic quality of his ethnicity, represented simultaneously by the incessant persecutions of “burnings,” “crazed Cossacks,” and “gas chambers,” and the intellectual and spiritual greatness of “Moses, Rabbi Akiba, and Maimonides” problematizes Joshua’s attempt to reconcile the positive and negative aspects of his people’s heritage. However, unlike the similarly perplexed Kerman Adler, Joshua does not react with uncontrollable anger or frustration; Moses is no longer “the Jew bastard” but a figure that Joshua respects and

admires. Also, Joshua articulates his unabashed awe of Maimonides in a manner that Kerman would never employ: "...the incomparable Maimonides. The Rambam. Rabbi Moses ben Maimon. ... Maimonides, doctor and philosopher, the soaring Jewish intellect of the middle ages, wrote a book Joshua had come to cherish, *The Guide for the Perplexed*" (189). Joshua's Jewishness, though problematic and perplexed, includes an awareness of great Jews who are "incomparable," and whose works he "had come to cherish."

Joshua's response to Carlos, a Jewish Spaniard whose family had been forcibly converted to Catholicism centuries ago but maintained their true faith in closely guarded secrecy, is a manifestation of his ethnic and religious ambivalence. Carlos is one of Richler's most complex marginal characters: he simultaneously embodies the defiant Jewish persistence cited by Kerman as a cause of anti-Semitism, and the ostensibly assimilated Jew who must practise his faith secretly to avoid persecution. Upon encountering Carlos, Joshua is confronted with the personification of a very peculiar assimilation. He initially reacts with judgmental distaste: "Joshua's immediate reaction was, You're not my brother, I'm not your keeper" (193). Confronted with the "defiantly Jewish" Carlos, the epitome of Jewish persistence in the face of persecution, Joshua immediately distances himself psychologically from the man, expressing the same reluctant dislike of his own people from which Kerman Adler suffers. However, when Carlos greets him with the Jewish prayer "Shema Israel," Joshua is unable to control "unbidden tears welling in his eyes" (194), an emotional reaction to the Hebrew prayer that Brenner explains is "the victim's irrevocable affirmation of his Jewishness before dying" (128) in the history of Jewish persecution. Joshua's disquiet deepens when the

defiant Jew Carlos incredulously inquires, “You can practise the religion openly [in Canada], can’t you?”, to which Joshua’s answer is, ““Yes ... but the truth is, I don’t come from a very observant family”” (194). Thus, despite his desire to dissociate himself from this personification of Jewish resolution, Joshua cannot escape the “weight of his Jewish heritage” (190) that manifests itself in his tears.

Once again, Brenner offers an excellent insight into Joshua’s Semitic quandary:

Carlos’ family tradition has taught him total loyalty and respect for his Jewish roots. ... Joshua, on the other hand, inherited from his father the notion that being Jewish is a handicap. Consequently, he tries very hard to assert his freedom by dissociating himself from his people. It is ironic that Joshua, in his efforts to reject his own heritage ... submits himself to the same hardships as Carlos who wishes to restore his bond with the Jewish tradition. (129-30)

Joshua, emulating the germinal Richlerian protagonist Kerman Adler, wants to reject and disclaim his people’s pain and suffering, but in doing so he also rejects the long tradition of pride and self-respect that their faith fosters. He consequently inherits the crushing weight of their persecution without the compensating strength of their spiritual tradition; he even fails to recognize or accept their individual help. He laments, after what may otherwise have been a faith-strengthening encounter with Carlos, “Jews, Jews, Joshua thought, everywhere I go there are other Jews to advise me. Clutching. Claiming” (195). Apparently, the inability of Kerman Adler to escape the “nagging persistency” (39) of his ethnic roots and his unwillingness to accept his Jewish identity survives intact in Joshua Shapiro.

There are numerous thematic parallels between *The Rotten People* and *Joshua Then and Now*, but none with the significance of the protagonists' struggle to accept themselves as Jews and not only to survive, but to succeed as members of their people. In his first novel, Richler earnestly attempts to tackle many of the same pressing issues of identity and ethnicity that he sought assiduously to resolve through his life's work, and this struggle is the most prominent seminal theme of the text. Richler's depiction of Kerman Adler is an initial character study that prefigures his more successful portraits of *St Urbain's Horseman's* Jake Hersh and the infamous Duddy Kravitz, characters whose Jewishness is among the defining facets of their troubled identities. Undoubtedly however, it is Joshua Shapiro who owes the most of any of Richler's anti-heroes to young Kerman Adler. Like the mature later fiction, *The Rotten People* is long on struggle and short on resolution; however, though Joshua remains unable to reconcile the problems that his earliest precursor introduced, Richler the Jewish novelist has come to a more tolerant and accepting attitude toward his characters' troubled Semitic identities. The seed that was sown in *The Rotten People* grew into one of Richler's best works, the sophisticated and refined exploration of modern Jewish life that *Joshua Then and Now* embodies.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Each of Richler's mature novels contain reflections on Jewish identity: Jake Hersch, the protagonist of *St. Urbain's Horseman*, is obsessed with bringing Josef Mengele to justice; Duddy Kravitz is the embodiment of the stereotypical unscrupulous Jewish businessman; *Solomon Gursky Was Here*'s Ephraim Gursky founds a tribe of Inuit Jews in the Canadian Arctic; and Barney Panofsky of *Barney's Version* is a Jewish Montrealer whose community provides both the setting and characters which populate the work.

<sup>2</sup> Richler wrote of his youthful voyage to Europe and his initial impressions of the land in his essay "My Father's Life," describing that continent as "A graveyard for the Jews. A continent where everything was broken or old" (62).

<sup>3</sup> Davidson lavishes praise on Richler for his portrayal of Reuben Shapiro: he is "one of Richler's best-conceived characters" (171) and "seamlessly, convincingly integrated into Joshua's world" (174).



## Chapter Two –

### ***The Rotten People's Narrative: Anti-Bildungsroman and Autobiography***

The basic narrative of Mordecai Richler's first novel is one that the author reworked and retold several times throughout his career. In this chapter I juxtapose segments of *The Rotten People* with *The Street* and *Joshua Then and Now* as examples of Richler's mature work, and provide interpretive analyses of his evolving narrative technique. *The Rotten People* contains numerous significant stories and incidents which resurface in slightly altered forms in Richler's later fiction; indeed, the novel contains such a wealth of subsequently reused narrative material that it evidently served Richler well as a rich vein of inspiration for his mature work. The most significant narrative characteristics that reappear in the later works I mention are reflective of the theme of the anti-*Bildungsroman* and the authorial use of autobiographical material. In discussing these aspects, I pay particular attention to the manner in which the early novel prefigures the narratives of the author's later work, and to the nature and degree of improvement that the mature texts display over the first novel, foremost of which is his increased ability to maintain an aesthetically distanced perspective on the roots of his protagonists' discontent. By examining this hallmark, I hope to demonstrate that this excellent quality which distinguishes Richler's best novels gestates in his first work.

The most significant narrative aspect of *The Rotten People* that reappears in his later work is that dictated by the *Bildungsroman* form. This generic form is a central organizing element in the structure of some of Richler's most important novels, perhaps most evident in *Son of a Smaller Hero*, which relates the growth of the young artist in

Montreal.<sup>1</sup> Citing a number of Richler's central works, Arnold Davidson remarks on the theme of *Bildungsroman* that

Like *The Acrobats* and *A Choice of Enemies*, *St. Urbain's Horseman* is a story of an artist – somewhat *manqué* – searching, in uneasy exile, for his own identity. Like *Son of a Smaller Hero*, *St. Urbain's Horseman* is a modified Canadian-Jewish *Bildungsroman*, a story of how the protagonist is shaped by his time, his place, and – a central theme in all of Richler's more serious fiction – his family. 139

The overarching narrative of *The Rotten People* is the *Bildungsroman* of a young North American Jew who attempts to escape family crises via a journey to Europe, a plot which received mature treatment in *Joshua Then and Now*. This latter novel is an important text for tracing the development of Richler's narrative powers, as there the author tells a story that is extremely similar to that of *The Rotten People* in a considerably more sophisticated and effective manner. Furthermore, Joshua Shapiro is a middle-aged protagonist whose youthful experiences are analogous to those of Kerman Adler, and thus comparisons of the structure and execution of the two textual representations reveal considerable insight into the evolution of the author's distinctive narrative technique.

The *Bildungsroman* is a generic term characterized by considerable breadth and inclusiveness, but I will use it here with a particular connotation – that of the “novel of personal development or education” which “deals with the relationship between self and society” (Rau 1-2). A related and antithetical form, the anti-*Bildungsroman* is a narrative “used to trace the development of psycho-pathological personalities, dysfunctional characters or societies” (5). This latter definition aptly describes the narrative

characteristics of *The Rotten People*. As its title suggests, it is a novel that explores the degeneration of both Kerman Adler, an individual, and the devastated post-World War Two society in which he must somehow function. Commenting on the dysfunctional nature of Richler's protagonists, G. David Sheps notes that

His young men in a hurry or on the make (whether the hustler, Duddy Kravitz; the impatient aesthete, André Bennett; or the mixture of the two, Noah Adler) ... are manic depressive ... They urgently need to succeed and are haunted by the fear of failure; they alternate between delusions of triumph and a suicidal sense of utter emptiness. (xi)

Kerman Adler and Joshua Shapiro are alike in that the events of their adolescence are largely responsible for the dysfunctional state in which the reader finds them at the opening of each novel; Richler gradually conveys the recognition that the psychological problems plaguing the protagonists have their roots deep in childhood, and are not simply reactions to their current situation. This recognition characterizes the author's individual treatment of the anti-*Bildungsroman*: Richler suggests that the "relationship between self and society" (Rau 2) of his protagonists in their youth is the most influential factor in their respective falls from grace, Kerman into insanity, and Joshua into public scandal, petty crime, and personal crises.

An example of *The Rotten People*'s concern with Kerman's relationship to society arises in a scene where he and his intellectual companions discuss Francisco Franco, the fascist dictator of Spain. After the communist character Barney Larkin chides Kerman for his willingness to "go to Spain and give dollars to Franco" as a tourist, the young protagonist replies that he "wouldn't be exactly *giving* dollars to Franco" and

that he would “remember my responsibilities and spread the doctrine of truth while I’m there” (73). Kerman’s sarcastic response to Larkin’s indignant condemnation that he is being irresponsible by indirectly supporting fascism is typical of the anti-hero’s attitude throughout the text. Confronted with the need to choose a particular moral and ethical ideology and not to deviate from it, Kerman retreats into the comforting stance of the sarcastic youngster who flippantly disregards the seriousness of his decisions. Larkin effectively characterizes Kerman’s moral evasiveness when he states that “You can’t keep your political responsibilities ready in a handy pocket and bring them out only when it’s morally convenient,” and continues to state that “Either you approve or disapprove of Franco. If you disapprove then your social conscience will prohibit your going to Spain and giving fascism the least iota of economic aid” (73). The phrases used by Larkin, such as “political responsibilities,” “morally convenient,” and “social conscience” indicate Richler’s concern with Kerman’s inability to define an ethical position and adhere to it, and this concern characterizes *The Rotten People*’s treatment of the anti-*Bildungsroman*. As Kerman states in exasperation, “It’s maddening: knowing so well what you’re against, but not knowing what you’re for” (84). The absence of an easily defined and wholly moral set of values in Kerman’s life creates an individual who drifts “from one drawing room into another, going neither forwards nor backwards” (84) and never finding peace or satisfaction in life; eventually, this aimless drifting contributes to his insanity and utter withdrawal from society.

*Joshua Then and Now*’s protagonist confronts a similar ethical dilemma, and suffers a similar fate. Quoting playwright John Osborne and journalist Paul Johnson respectively, Joshua laments that “there were no good, clean causes left” (233) like the

Spanish Civil War, where “The issues seemed absolutely clear-cut: right on one side, wrong on the other” (257). Like Kerman, Joshua recognizes that he requires an absolute moral position of “right on one side” and “wrong on the other” to define and structure his life and his relationship with society, and he feels similarly conflicted about his generation’s current ethical options: “Too young to have fought [in Spain], but necessarily convinced that they would have gone, proving to themselves and the essential Mr. Hemingway that they did not lack for *cojones*, it was the first political kiss. Not so much a received political idea as a moral inheritance” (233). Again, Richler concerns his characters with social issues such as “received political ideas” and a “moral inheritance,” and again he suggests that these issues are no longer defined clearly enough to provide his protagonist with an ethical position of any utility. According to Nathan Cohen, Richler “depicts as hero someone caged in a hopelessly corrupt society; to stay on is to go mentally sterile and die, to quit it demands singular comprehension and a martyr’s courage” (46).

Joshua’s literary heroes, including Hemingway, George Orwell, and Osborne (all writers who were involved in and wrote of the Spanish Civil War), prove themselves unequal to the task of living up to their own moral standards, thereby throwing Richler’s character into an ethical quandary:

When Joshua last caught sight of Osborne, somebody he had once taken for a spokesman, he was reposing in a photograph for the benefit of the women’s page of the London *Sunday Times*, acting out exactly the sort of item that [Osborne’s protagonist] Jimmy Porter used to read aloud, outraged. (233-34)

The allusion to the play *Look Back in Anger* and its central figure Jimmy Porter is significant: Porter has been described as “the anti-hero, the first ‘angry young man’” in British drama, and Osborne’s play as an exploration of “the apathy of the time, where principles were being exchanged for bland materialism” (“John Osborne” 1). The relationship of the “‘angry young man,’” in this case Joshua, to the “apathy of the time” and place in which he lives is the central element of *Joshua Then and Now*’s anti-*Bildungsroman*. Joshua’s disappointment in his literary role model’s abandonment of the morals that his writing espouses disillusion him toward his own ethical system: “Ah, but once there was Spain. Once, writers had been committed to revolutionary change, not their own absurdity” (234). Richler’s juxtaposition of “revolutionary change” with “absurdity” suggests the moral lapse that has occurred in Joshua’s world, that he, like Kerman Adler, lives in a world of fallen ideals and ethical indecision. Like Kerman Adler, Joshua also retreats into his own world, although unlike Kerman, he finds a measure of peace and satisfaction with a quiet family life, isolated from society and unconcerned with revolution and moral outrage. The moral connection “between self and society” (Rau 5) of Richler’s anti-hero protagonist is irrevocably severed in both novels.

A summary of the plot of *The Rotten People* illuminates the narrative parallels with *Joshua Then and Now*, and the ways in which the novels explore their protagonists’ aspirations and failures within the *Bildungsroman* and anti-*Bildungsroman* genres:

Kerman Adler, a young Jew from North America, is living in Europe and is a member of a circle of expatriate artists, writers, and intellectuals who had “come to Paris to paint pictures and write books” and “be *interesting people*” when they return home (82). He

suffers from serious family problems and deep dissatisfaction with life in his native city (which, though it is never stated, we can assume is Montréal, given the locale of Richler's other works and the author's personal history). This departure of the protagonist from the provincialism of home also reappears in *Son of a Smaller Hero*, where "the eponymous nonconformist [Noah Adler] wrests himself free of the tribal clutch and embarks for England in search of a meaningful existence" (Cohen 46).

The anti-hero of an anti-*Bildungsroman* must necessarily be a tortured figure; Kerman apparently has psychological problems, including paranoia and insomnia. He is also, we learn, in love with an older, married teacher named Helen Perlman, with whom he had a sexual affair in high school: "Even as a boy of thirteen in her class he had wondered about and wanted Helen," but "He had never dared suppose it would become a reality" (220).<sup>2</sup> Eventually Kerman and Helen reunite in London and travel to the Spanish island of Ibiza to continue their affair, to escape from Paris's judgemental social circle, and so that Kerman can "lay irresponsibly in the sun with a woman at his side" (221). In Ibiza, Kerman becomes disillusioned with his lover when they encounter a pair of German characters, who we are led to believe are Nazis on the run, and Helen becomes enamoured with the male Nazi named Krauss (a figure whom Richler reused in *The Acrobats*). During his stay on the island Kerman's disillusionment deepens when he finds that his two best male friends from Paris are actually homosexual lovers, one of whom eventually dies from tuberculosis. Kerman eventually abandons Helen to Krauss, returns to Paris, and discovers that he is insane when he realizes that the physical manifestations of his paranoia, "gnawing rats" (1), are actually hallucinations. The

supporting narrative, in the manner of the anti-*Bildungsroman*, seeks to explain how and why Kerman came to such an unfortunate end.

It is not an overstatement to assert that Kerman's story in *The Rotten People* reappears in only slightly modified form in *Joshua Then and Now* as the story of Joshua Shapiro's youth. In many prominent aspects, it forms the story of "Joshua then," the important background plot of the text. The similarities between the novels are legion, and suggest a conscious return by the author to the narrative of his first work of extended fiction. Like Kerman Adler, young Joshua is also a Jewish Canadian intellectual who leaves his dysfunctional family and, "living frugally, began to set aside money for his trip to Spain. Madrid. The Ebro. Teruel. Guernica. But he would visit Paris first. Paris, France. Where Hemingway had gone" (119). Joshua also becomes a member of a circle of expatriate artists and writers who, like Kerman's friends who want to "paint pictures and write books," all wish to "write, really write" (118). Like Kerman, he also travels to Ibiza, and also encounters a German there, this time named "Dr. Dr. Mueller" whom Joshua believes to be a Nazi in hiding from the authorities. Joshua also becomes involved with a woman who is sought by the German, and a similar love triangle develops. Another similarity between the stories is the sub-plot of a scandalous homosexual affair which, though in *Joshua Then and Now* is revealed to be a misinterpretation of rumours and falsehoods, also finds closure in the death of the apparent lover (Sidney Murdoch) from terminal illness.

Although the later novel does not culminate in Joshua's insanity, the events on Ibiza do continue to haunt him throughout his life, and lay the foundations for the older anti-hero's considerable family and personal troubles. The novel's primary narrative



explores Joshua's difficult battle to prevent the memories of his misspent youth from disrupting his new life; therefore, the text can, like *The Rotten People*, also be appropriately classed as an extended anti-*Bildungsroman*, although it is less exclusively focused on the protagonist's neuroses than Richler's first novel. Like his predecessor Kerman Adler, disturbing dreams plague Joshua, in which the painful memories of his youthful misadventures on Ibiza threaten to overwhelm him. Kerman's "greatest fear" in his dreams is "the loss of his reason;" he "felt he couldn't much longer cope with the inhumanities of life and still maintain his sanity" (261), while Joshua fears for his future happiness, warning the Nazi in his dream that "'If you think you can rob me of my manhood, you're out of your mind. I'm not running, Mueller. ... Because in the years ahead I'm going to fall in love with Pauline. We're going to have three children. I will not be ashamed. I'm a man, not a mouse'" (185). Joshua's fears of emasculation by Mueller and his shame at his own poor behaviour towards the German (who we learn is innocent) comprise a neurosis that he is unsuccessful in vanquishing. These fears, born of childhood experience, are characteristic of Richler's anti-heroes who typically find themselves haunted by the events of their youth.

The use of autobiographical material typifies Richler's first, germinal anti-*Bildungsroman*, and a significant aspect of Richler's later novels is their strongly autobiographical basis. Richler seems to have taken the maxim "write about what you know" to heart; each of his major novels and works of fiction feature parallels with his own life. Joel Yanofsky, a Richler enthusiast and critic, comments that

It's not a coincidence that Richler's protagonists are all roughly the same age as he was at the moment he was bringing them to life. ... The self-

involved Noah Adler; the on-the-make Duddy Kravitz; the beleaguered Mortimer Griffin in *Cocksure*; the jealous Jake Hersh in *St. Urbain's Horseman*; the mischievous Joshua Shapiro in *Joshua Then and Now*; the perpetually intoxicated Moses Berger in *Solomon Gursky Was Here*; the vulnerable Barney Panofsky in *Barney's Version*; these are all disguised – and not very meticulously disguised – versions of Richler. (101)

In addition to his protagonists' autobiographical resonance, Richler's tendency to satirize actual persons (poet A.M. Klein as "L.B. Berger" and the powerful Bronfman family as the Gurskys in *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, various Toronto literati in *The Incomparable Atuk*) has been well documented by biographers such as Yanofsky and Michael Posner, and incidents that appear in his fiction are frequently elaborations and fictional treatments of verifiable events.<sup>3</sup> For example, Yanofsky recognizes that "the incident which kick-starts [*Son of a Smaller Hero*] has an identical counterpart in Richler's essay, 'My Father's Life'" (66), and Abraham Levitan goes one step further, citing *Barney's Version* as indicative of "The practice of airing all of one's dirty laundry - be it sexual, political, or interpersonal - only to assert distance through the creation of a thinly-veiled protagonist, [which] has dominated Jewish storytelling throughout the latter half of this century" (1).

Of course, any foray into criticism that characterizes fiction as autobiography must be handled carefully and objectively; it is impossible to say with total certainty that this event, or that character, was drawn directly from the author's life. However, Richler himself wrote, in reference to his father's practise of keeping journals in a code of his own invention, that he also "tends to remember slights – recording them in my mind's eye – transmogrifying them – finally publishing them in a code more accessible than my

father's. Making them the stuff of fiction" ("My Father's Life" 66). To frame the critical relationship between Richler's use of autobiography and his anti-*Bildungsroman* novels appropriately, it is useful to consider the perspectives of the author's critics; one cautions us in an essay on *Son of a Smaller Hero* that "however much Richler draws on his own life [in the novel] ... it is a work of the imagination and must be considered as such" (Ramraj 18). Another critic remarks of *The Street*, a lightly fictionalized memoir of the author's youth, that

Most of the specifics of the memoir are consistent with Richler's own experience, but they are also consistent with that experience as it is refracted through the earlier and later fictions. Or, in simpler terms, the narrator of *The Street* could be the young Mordecai Richler, but he could also be a younger version of Noah Adler in *Son of a Smaller Hero* or Jacob Hersh in *St. Urbain's Horseman*. ... To draw any such distinctions in perhaps arbitrary and unnecessary. Neither is the strict biographical accuracy of *The Street* an issue. Richler would probably argue that the real life of an imaginative writer is the life that he imagines it to be.

(Davidson 2-3)

Although the assertion that it is "arbitrary and unnecessary" to explore the relationship between autobiography and fiction tends toward the simplistic, the supposition that "the real life of an imaginative writer is the life that he imagines it to be" is a pertinent insight. Richler, according to Yanofsky, would "write about his own life, making little or no effort to disguise it, and then announce with a straight face that it was all fiction" (264). The undeniably autobiographical tone of his novels, many of which fit

the *Bildungsroman* template, deserves careful attention; the recurring depictions of specific incidents in Richler's life that appear in both *The Rotten People* and *The Street* are among the most carefully rendered in either work. In order to construct effectively and accurately the narrative of an anti-*Bildungsroman* that justifies and explains the causes of his characters' dysfunctions, Richler draws liberally upon disturbing events in his own youth which must have been highly influential in the development of his own personality, and uses them to convincingly construct his anti-heroes.

The degree of similarity in the plots of *The Rotten People* and *Joshua Then and Now* is almost exceeded by the former novel's similarity to *The Street*, and it is this memoir, where numerous set-pieces from the earlier novel reappear as independent stories, that demonstrates how strongly autobiographical Richler's fiction can be. While *Joshua Then and Now* certainly contains parallels with Richler's own life (he too spent time in Ibiza in his youth; the early drafts of *Joshua* comprise an openly autobiographical memoir entitled *Back to Ibiza*), it is *The Street* that sheds the most light on *The Rotten People*'s use of autobiography in the construction of the anti-*Bildungsroman* narrative. In a set piece in *The Rotten People* entitled "What is Kerman?" (113-22), Richler explores the roots of his protagonist's discontent; significantly, the piece is a series of flashbacks to Kerman's early life, the formative years that contribute to his eventual insanity. It is within this set-piece that identifiably autobiographical elements come into full play in the novel's narrative. Within the set piece, the story of the young protagonist's dying grandmother or "*Baba*" (the Yiddish-Galician term) appears prominently, and it reappears as the second chapter of Richler's memoir *The Street*. The author's biographer Michael Posner relates the autobiographical precedent for these

depictions, and quotes Richler's uncle David who states that, during the author's youth, Mordecai's mother Lily "was looking after her mother for seven years, who was totally paralyzed by a stroke. She was bedridden, couldn't speak. Lily would take her out of bed, wash her, clean her" (19-20). His grandmother's death apparently had great personal significance for the young author; in *The Rotten People*, the tale is treated as a formative incident in the development of Kerman Adler's troubled personality:

And that's just the way Kerman felt on his way home from *chaider* the day his grandmother kicked off. (Not that he knew she was dead yet.) Then bango! There was fat Uncle Issey-Pissey standing smack in the door and blocking out with his fat other uncles and aunties not so big. "Kerman, *boyele*," he said. And here he let one of his big flabby hands drop on Kerman's narrow shoulders. "Your *Baba* is dead."

So the old bitch was finally dead! (113-14)

Richler's depiction of this incident, drawn from his own adolescence, establishes one of the causes of Kerman's neuroses. The narrator asks, "So can you (I mean I'm asking you?) blame Kerman yet if he was glad when she died," because "Kerman would often stay home alone with the old bitch and when it got dark he was afraid and would hide behind chairs. Sometimes – although he'd never admit it – crying like a baby too" (115), poignantly relating a childhood incident that helps to explain the roots of Kerman's eventual insanity. Although the tone of the quotation is rather too flippant and immature for artistic effectiveness, it is Richler's early use of this autobiographical sketch that holds critical significance to my argument.

It is probable that actual incident which prompted this fictional representation was still too recent for the nineteen-year-old author to distance himself sufficiently from the emotional response to the events and provide a more objective and effective depiction.

Critics have observed of Richler's early novels, such as *Son of a Smaller Hero*, that

The author has some difficulty ... keeping himself consistently apart from his creation ... The absence of aesthetic distance between himself and his protagonist weakens Richler's otherwise perceptive study of Noah, for he appears occasionally to share Noah's youthful posturing and assumption of moral superiority to almost everyone ... (Ramraj 18)

This observation is directly applicable to Richler's treatment of Kerman Adler, who shares both the family name and youthful attitudes of Noah. Kerman/Richler's "youthful posturing and assumption of moral superiority" are prevalent in *The Rotten People* through statements such as "all doctors are full of shit" and his frequent pejorative references to his elders as "the old bitch" (113) and "the old maid bitch" (114). These juvenile statements do not persuade the reader to understand or sympathize with dysfunctional characters such as Noah and Kerman because their puerility is not sufficiently distanced from the narrative voice. Richler has yet to separate himself adequately from his protagonists, and it is therefore difficult to distinguish between the character's shortcomings and those of the authorial narrator.

In *The Street*, written some twenty years after *The Rotten People*, the narrative treatment of the dying grandmother episode is essentially similar, but reveals an impressive degree of artistic growth in its author and his ability to sustain the "aesthetic distance" necessary for a more "objective appraisal" of the dysfunctional anti-hero.

Contextual juxtapositions of *The Rotten People* with the mature works reveal the growth of the author; young Richler's "lack of objectivity becomes more readily apparent if *Son of a Smaller Hero* is compared with a later work," such as *The Street*, "where a mature Richler succeeds in sustaining an objective appraisal of the protagonist whose experiences quite often parallel his" (Ramraj 18). Here *The Street*'s narrator relates the same incident with much greater effectiveness:

It was ... on a Friday afternoon, that I came home to find a crowd gathered in front of our house.

"That's the grandson," somebody said.

A knot of old people stood staring at our front door from across the street. A taxi pulled up and my aunt hurried out, hiding her face in her hands.

"After so many years," a woman said.

"And probably next year they'll discover a cure. Isn't that always the case?"

The flat was clotted. Uncles and aunts from my father's side of the family, strangers, Dr. Katzman, neighbours, were all milling around and talking in hushed voices. My father was in the kitchen, getting out the apricot brandy. "Your grandmother's dead," he said. (48)

In this passage, Richler evokes a much greater range of emotional responses and presents a more rich range of thematic elements than in his first novel. Because the narration is now delivered in the first-person voice, readers are not required or intended to draw a distinction between the narrator and the protagonist, and thus can relate to the young

figure's predicament more readily. It is immaterial whether or not the emotions and perspectives of the character are those of the author, as the text is a memoir, and some lack of aesthetic distance is expected. Paradoxically, although the voices of narrator and protagonist are now indistinguishable, the objectivity and aesthetic distance between the two are increased; this insight relates to Arnold Davidson's comment that it is "perhaps arbitrary and unnecessary" (3) to draw distinctions between autobiography and fictionalized memoir. Richler's accomplishment in *The Street* is a convincing depiction of the youthful experiences of a character "whose experiences quite often parallel his" (Ramraj 18), a portrayal which fleshes out the background of his recurring anti-heroic figures such as Kerman Adler and Joshua Shapiro.

In these autobiographically derived narratives and incidents, Richler's powers of depiction have grown demonstrably as well, though they never interrupt the narrative flow. The disturbing crowd of gathered mourners, described in *The Rotten People* as "fat other uncles and aunties not so big," has become a more realized image in *The Street*, with details that produce a subtle and effective response. The spare, economical use of figures such as the "aunt ... hiding her face in her hands" and the "strangers, Dr. Katzman, neighbours, ... all milling around and talking in hushed voices" elevate the description above that of *The Rotten People*'s childish narrator, whose hostile response to his well-meaning family falls short of earnest satire and remains at the level of the puerile. In contrast with *The Rotten People*, *The Street*'s emotionally restrained narrative prose accomplishes what Richler became so adept at doing: revealing a wealth of cultural and personal information about a character with a minimum of explanation. Even a simple detail such as the narrator's father in the kitchen "getting out the apricot brandy"



conveys a broad range of emotive and intellectual elements to the reader, including the father's assumption of responsibility for the assembled mourners, and his reliance upon alcohol to ease the pain of the death and improve the social atmosphere of the wake. These subtle implications are a result of the author's increased facility at maintaining objectivity and restraining emotional involvement or personal identification with his protagonists, and consequently creating more convincing and sympathetic anti-heroes.

But it is in another pair of representations of the same autobiographical incident that the full growth of Richler's abilities is most evident: the true story of the German Jewish refugee, Julius Frankel, who came to live with the author's family and usurped their father's position, again laying the foundation for a future dysfunctional figure. As Richler recounts in his essay "My Father's Life," his "mother was enthralled" with the cultured Jewish refugee who came to stay with the family, and the author also refers to "love letters ... from the refugee" (60) that his mother receives. Frankel, who fled the Holocaust in Germany by immigrating to Montreal, appears in *The Rotten People* as "Herr Schnitzer" and, though slightly altered, in *The Street* as "Herr Bambinger." In *The Rotten People*, Richler offers a painfully personalized account of the refugee's disruptive influence on Kerman Adler's family, while in *The Street*, the account is more heavily fictionalized and more artistically effective. Once again, Richler's biographer Michael Posner relates the autobiographical precedent for the story; he quotes the author's older brother Avrum explaining a traumatic incident in Mordecai's youth:

[Mordecai] told me once that once when he was asleep in his bed on St. Urbain St. – he was maybe thirteen or fourteen years old – he heard a noise. He said, "I woke up and there they were, fucking – her and

Frankel.” ... Yes, in the same room on the other bed. ... Mordecai probably pretended to be asleep, but this had to be a terrible trauma. (21)

This “terrible trauma” appears in *The Rotten People* as the most disturbing and personally disruptive incident in Kerman’s youth, the incident which is most directly responsible for his insanity. Once again it is evident that Richler is drawing upon his own experience to create a sympathetic anti-hero, and once again his depiction suffers through lack of aesthetic distance and overstatement:

One night – a night that Kerman shall never forget come rain or come shine – something *most horrible* happened.

Kerman shared a room with his mother. He couldn’t sleep that night. Late, Schnitzer came into the room softly.

HE: (With a light, cultured Berlin accent.) Is he asleep?

SHE: He’s asleep.

He got into bed and kissed her. Kerman trembled and tried like mad to fall asleep but he couldn’t because he heard it. A slow, rhythmic pumping sounds in the next bed, like when somebody is pumping the sink, only slushier. (121)

Again, young Richler’s description of his own traumatic experience does not so much shed light on the neuroses of his dysfunctional protagonist as create readerly confusion between author and character. The preceding description of the conflict between Kerman’s parents effectively demonstrates the author’s lack of aesthetic distance from his trauma: “Leave her alone. Don’t hit her. He sobbed. He cried. He went crazy” (120). Here the narrator’s voice is indiscriminately blended with that of Kerman, thus creating a

lack of artistic distance that lessens the effectiveness of the otherwise successful portrayal. The reader remains unable to separate the descriptive narrative interjections, such as “He sobbed. He cried. He went crazy,” with the protagonist’s anguished cries of “Leave her alone” and “Don’t hit her.” Thus the author’s voice and that of his creation become one, and the resulting prose lacks authenticity in its rendering of the event.

Conversely, *The Street*’s depiction of the protagonist’s confrontation with the German refugee, now depicted as “Herr Bambinger,” displays a more successful, though less extreme, construction of a traumatic incident, and offers a more reserved and distanced portrayal. Gone is the salacious, scatological description of the sexual act that so perturbs young Kerman; in fact, entirely gone is the affair with the protagonist’s mother. Instead, Herr Bambinger creates enormous tension in the household by usurping the youth’s bedroom and persuading his parents to deprive the boy of his few material pleasures, including comic books and cups of rationed coffee. The narrator’s confrontation with his parents and Bambinger is a skillfully constructed scene. After the protagonist threatens to destroy his ration coupons if he is not allowed to drink coffee, his mother replies,

“You will do no such thing. Now apologize to Mr. Bambinger immediately.”

Bambinger smiled mockingly at me, waiting.

“Well, the hell with you,” I shouted, turning on Bambinger.

“Why’d you have to run away from Hitler, you chicken? Couldn’t you have stayed behind and fought in the underground? Wouldn’t that have

been better than running out on your own wife and kid to save your own skin?"

My mother slapped me.

"Okay," I said, bolting. "I'm leaving home." (82)

Here, Richler now chooses to relate a less scandalous though equally distressing formative incident rather than shocking readers with the highly disturbing personalized account of his encounter with his mother's illicit sexuality. As in Richler's rewrite of his grandmother's death scene, this portrayal improves upon its predecessor through greater subtlety. Instead of lurid details such as the "slow, rhythmic pumping sounds in the next bed," which attempt to force the reader to sympathize with Kerman, we are presented with an incident that is inherently disturbing without the need for such explicit and repugnant diction. The narrator's frustration, embarrassment, and distress are evident through the actions of his mother who "slapped" him and his angry outburst that he is "leaving home," without the explicit explanation to which Richler resorts in *The Rotten People*. There, the confrontation between Kerman and the refugee is excessively explicit in its explanation of the protagonist's trauma: "Schnitzer had laughed, that horrible inhuman laugh," we are told, and "Kerman still carried the scar. *Many scars*" (261). *The Street*'s narrator's scars are implicit, and do not require such overt narrative indication.

*The Street* was written almost thirty years after *The Rotten People*, and *Joshua Then and Now* followed a full forty years after the author's first attempt to tell this story; clearly, the narrative of the sensitive, anguished young protagonist who strives to overcome the disruptions of a troubled family life and traumatic youth held great significance for the author, and his literary examinations of this theme continued

throughout his career. The story of Kerman Adler, the germinal Richlerian anti-hero, which becomes the story of both Joshua Shapiro and the narrator of *The Street*, is an exploration of the formative influence that adolescent experiences have on adulthood, and the potential dangers of an inability to accept and understand the events and incidents of one's youth. On a basic level, it is the specific actions and stories that Richler employs to construct his plots and narratives that characterize *The Rotten People* as a seminal text, but in a more encompassing manner, it is his treatment of the *Bildungsroman* theme and his use of autobiography that hold the most significance for the author's critics. Richler's recurring attempts to write a convincing and sophisticated fictional version of his own life suggest a desire to interpret and communicate his own biography from the very beginning of his writing career.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> George Woodcock summarizes effectively the *Bildungsroman* narrative of *Son of a Smaller Hero*, stating that it is, “in its narrowest sense, the account of an attempt by a Jewish youth in Montreal to escape from the mental bonds of the ghetto and, having passed through the feared and desired world of the *Goyim*, to realize his true self in the freedom which he believes exists beyond the invisible walls” (15).

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, in Richler’s final novel *Barney’s Version*, protagonist Barney Panofsky is similarly obsessed with his high school teacher’s sexuality: “Tossing and turning in bed last night,” writes the aging and nostalgic Barney, “I was finally able to conjure up the luscious Mrs. Ogilvy of cherished memory, in a stimulating fantasy of my own invention” (141).

<sup>3</sup> Larry Zolf expresses his belief that Richler “is at his best when he is autobiographical and idiosyncratic, first-person and Jewish” (115).

### Chapter Three –

#### The Germination of Richler's Style in *The Rotten People*

Over a career that has produced ten published novels, Richler has developed his own distinctive style and voice. Richler's mature voice is characterized by the use of set pieces, openings *in medias res*, black humour, colloquial language, masterful dialogue, and satirical subject matter ("Mordecai Richler" 1000), aspects that a close examination of *The Rotten People* reveals in their incubatory phase. If readers were to turn to *The Rotten People* for a familiar and easily recognizable text that fits stylistically in the author's canon alongside his strongest works, which include *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *St. Urbain's Horseman*, and *Barney's Version*, they would inevitably be disappointed. The author's youth and inexperience are even more evident in *The Rotten People* than in *The Acrobats*, which Richler referred to as "his embarrassing first novel" (Fax). Even a superficial reading of *The Rotten People* reveals the clumsiness and imperfections of the work, but a discerning reader with intimate knowledge of the Richler *oeuvre* will recognize the roots of the author's characteristic style in the text.

Perhaps the most prominent stylistic technique in *The Rotten People* which grew into a fundamental aspect of Richler's writing is his use of set pieces. Numerous critics identify that Richler's novels in general "tend to be more episodic and mechanical than organically flowing" (Ramraj 11) and that *The Acrobats* (which closely resembles *The Rotten People* in terms of style) in particular is "made up of shuffled scenes" where "the searching spot-light shifts from acrobat to acrobat" (Bowering 7). The digressive, episodic plotting of *The Rotten People* establishes its seminal status in the development of this aspect of Richler's style. Ray Smith aptly describes this tendency in the author's

work in his afterword to *Son of a Smaller Hero*: “Richler is also willing to expand sideways into scenes which, however relevant to the main line-through, are self-contained, [and] have enough life of their own that he may well publish them as excerpts” (206). Examples of these “self-contained” excerpts in Richler’s published novels are numerous. In *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, Richler utilizes digressive interludes such as the uproarious “HAPPY BAR-MITZVAH, BERNIE!” (152-59) to great comic effect; few readers of *St. Urbain’s Horseman* will forget the ludicrous baseball game of Canadian expatriates in London (237-49); Barney Panofsky’s received fan letters (125-29) provide a hilarious yet irrelevant digression in *Barney’s Version*; and the meetings of the “McKenzie King Memorial Society” (315-29) in *Joshua Then and Now* are all germane examples of Richlerian set scenes. Within these scenes, various aspects of Richler’s style are condensed and intensified, having “a life of their own,” and *The Rotten People*’s set scenes are similarly characteristic of the style of the work as a whole.

*The Rotten People* reveals Richler pioneering his own use of self-contained scenes with excessive enthusiasm. The novel encapsulates a lengthy progression of frequently bizarre and intentionally disturbing interludes which tend to interrupt the narrative flow. In one such scene, allegorical figures including “Death” (73), “Life” (76), and “Fyodor, The Soul Swirling in the Styx” (11) engage in a fantastic dialogue on the futility of enduring human existence, a philosophical discussion with little or no relevance to the overarching narrative. Richler’s tendency to alert the reader to imminent departures from the central narrative with overt declarations emphasizes *The Rotten People*’s jarringly episodic structure; for example, he states that certain sections are “A Short Digression” (113) or a “Play Within The Play” (73), and frequently titles



particularly digressive scenes with names such as “What is Kerman?” (113) and “What is a Jew?” (214). Although these scenes often have little narrative significance and typically lack continuity, they serve as stylistic microcosms of the work proper and are among the most entertaining and revealing segments of the novel.

In one of *The Rotten People*’s earliest and most memorable set scenes, Kerman experiences a horrifying nightmare which vividly evokes the chaos and disintegration of London, where segments of the plot are set. As its title suggests, *The Rotten People* is not a heartening tale, but rather an exploration of the degeneration of society and morality in the wake of the Second World War, and the spiritual and social crises which ensue. Running parallel to this external devastation is Kerman Adler’s own inner desolation, which climaxes in the ultimate recognition of his insanity. Arguably, Richler’s grotesque depiction of setting in “the London nightmare” (6-11) suffers through overstatement, although since this passage appears verbatim in *The Acrobats* (150-52), it must have satisfied the young author as acceptable prose:

It was the London nightmare again.

... A real empty stomach and a rotting soul flaking at the sides walked love and love through the purple bomb-gutted streets of the victorious city. The yellow pasteboard moon hanging like a bright lollypop in the big blue sky illuminated a building on Old Kent Road. ... From the top of his colonnade a one-eyed admiral of another time and place tottered precariously as the pigeons heaped still more piles of excrement on the gawking tourists below. The young bobby with a foreign gaffer in his arms beamed while a stray arm snapped the shutter of

a Kodak exploding the whole area in a firecracker of light.

Simultaneously and nearby a black-toothed Welsh whore spat. Nobody noticed. (6-7)

The set scene of the “London nightmare” in general, and this quotation in particular, is an encapsulation of the stylistic and thematic characteristics of the novel as a whole, and is the earliest example of the microcosmic set piece in Richler’s fiction. This surrealistic *pastiche* of disjointed images and figures creates a frightening ambiance of hectic action and indefinite threats. These chaotic elements contribute to the purposeful incoherence of the nightmare set scene, as Kerman is torn from the safety and familiarity of his Paris hotel room into the throes of uneasy sleep; young Richler’s threatening and incoherent style serves to develop the theme of post-war chaos that the author depicts throughout the novel. Here, early in the text, Richler evokes the “bomb-gutted ... victorious city” of London with garish verisimilitude, emphasizes the Pyrrhic nature of the city’s survival through the ironic contrast of the descriptors “bomb-gutted” and “victorious,” and effectively establishes the Kafkaesque atmosphere of the story.

It should be noted here (as yet another indicator of how *The Rotten People* is a forerunner of Richler’s later texts) that the language and imagery in this set scene compare productively with Richler’s celebrated depiction of Montreal’s Jewish community in *Son of a Smaller Hero*. George Woodcock asserts that in that novel, “The Jewish world is painted with a vivid impasto which suggests the vitality and variety of human impulse” (“Son of a Smaller Hero” 19); another critic asserts “[Richler] did such a successful job that, whatever life in the ghetto actually was, readers have accepted his description as the definitive one” (Smith 204). One of these memorable descriptions in

*Son of a Smaller Hero* immediately recalls specific aspects of *The Rotten People's* London nightmare; precisely as he did in *The Rotten People*, Richler begins his portrayal of setting by naming the city, and proceeds to sketch in the scene with a collage of threatening, repugnant and disjointed urban images and details:

Montréal is cleanly defined on cold autumn nights. Each building, each tree, seems to exist as a separate and shivering object, exposed to the winds again after a flabby summer. Downtown the neon trembles like fractures in the dark. Fuzziness, bugs, groups of idlers blurring cigar-store windows, have all retreated together. Whores no longer stroll up and down St Lawrence Boulevard, but beckon from the shelter of doorways or linger longer at nightclub bars. The mountain, which all summer long had seemed a gentle green slope, looms up brutal against the night sky. Streets seem longer, noises more hard. (45)

Richler brilliantly establishes the unforgiving urban landscape of downtown Montréal with many of the same elements that he used to portray the British capitol. References to the peculiar, unsettling quality of light that fills the streets of London such as the “yellow pasteboard moon hanging like a bright lollipop” and the “firecracker of light” reappear in Montreal as trembling neon, “like fractures in the dark.” Richler uses particular street names such as “Old Kent Road” and “St Lawrence Boulevard” to lend specificity to what are otherwise anonymous inner city streetscapes, and he also employs similar *pastiches* of figures and images in both texts. The “young bobby” and “black-toothed Welsh whore” of London are transplanted into Montréal as “groups of idlers” and “whores” who “beckon from doorways;” in both instances, the whores suggest the cities’ degeneracy

and vice. Also in both texts, a palpable sense of indefinite threats linger: the “bomb-gutted streets” and “piles of excrement” in London prefigure the “cold,” “shivering,” and “brutal” streets of Montreal.

Richler uses imagery and diction in the “London nightmare” to develop further his thematic concern<sup>1</sup> with the decay of post-war European society, suggesting that the imperial glory of England has devolved into little more than a circus of tawdry tourist attractions and degenerate vice, a stylistic usage that recurs in *St. Urbain's Horseman* and *Son of a Smaller Hero*. Clearly, like Noah Adler's Montreal, the time and place in which Kerman Adler travels is not a comforting one. He flees to Europe to escape the provinciality and family conflicts of his native city, but upon his arrival he encounters a world in which the glory and grandeur enjoyed by previous generations have passed. Of particular effectiveness is Richler's imagery that symbolizes Britain's faded imperial power: the “one-eyed admiral of another time and place” (Admiral Nelson, the English naval hero whose statue dominates Trafalgar Square) no longer exudes power and supremacy, but now instead heaps “piles of excrement on the gawking tourists below” (7). The “piles of excrement” establish the disappointed antipathy that Kerman feels toward this lapsed hero, and in an adjoining passage, Kerman views statues of “imperial lions” who “drooped lugubriously, [their] brown nicotinic teeth beginning to crack and fall out ... gleaming like rotting meat in the sun” (7). The rotten, dilapidated lions are the embodiment of the devastated British empire, which no longer dominates the world from a seat of regal authority, but has been reduced by the war to a state of utter degradation. Although Kerman seeks worldliness and sophistication in European capitals such as London and Paris, the depressing reality of those cities shatters his provincial illusions.

Richler, as a Canadian author who lived and wrote many of his books in London, frequently explores the discrepancies between his expectations of London as an immigrant and the often disappointing actuality of the city in his fiction, and *The Rotten People* is the first instance of this thematic tendency.

Richler often uses scatological diction and related images of defilement in his later novels<sup>2</sup> to suggest moral ruination and decay, particularly in his satirical pieces, and *The Rotten People* initiates this stylistic technique. Here, Richler uses scatology to intensify his thematic depiction of the depressing state to which great English literary figures have fallen. Their fate is similar to that of the imperial lions and historical figures:

Flung into Westminster Abbey on the tide of a frantic mob, Kerman saw more Kodaks and women chewing gum trample on the tombs of Samuel Butler and Charles Dickens. He got the idea and began to pick vigorously at his ass while standing on Alex Pope. (7-8)

Kerman then foresees his own inevitable disastrous end in the fate of these great authors, and reflects to himself that those who survive him will “burn my body on hot flame and sprinkle my ashes in the urinals in the men’s room” (8), revealing his own pessimistic attitude and lack of hope in the future. These images of “urinals,” trampled tombs, and Kerman picking “vigorously at his ass” characterize young Richler’s scatological stylistic quality. Through their scatological elements, these quotations viciously deride the insensitive and disrespectful tourists, with their cameras and chewing gum, who “trample on the tombs” of the literary greats whom Kerman admires. This admiration does not stop him from participating in the insolent defilement of their tombs by picking

“vigorously at his ass,” however. Richler suggests through Kerman’s disrespectful actions that the younger generation of pilgrims to Westminster Abbey, though they may be well intentioned, contribute to the commercialization and devaluation of the cultural and literary history of Britain through their impertinent behaviour and insensitivity to the worth of their venerated intellectuals. Again, Richler’s diction and imagery reveal a wealth of thematic material.

The young author of *The Rotten People* employs various modes of dualism in his later works, and this dualism, which also manifests recurrently in imagery and diction, has its stylistic origin in that first novel. He revisits the theme of Britain’s former glory and present waste, introduced through Kerman’s nightmare, in *St Urbain’s Horseman*, where protagonist Jake Hersh reflects upon dual conceptions of England: his own perspective as a Canadian expatriate, and that of native London denizen Harry Stein. Again, Richler’s imagery evokes famous British figures representative of imperial prestige, and then juxtaposes them with the actual sloth and vice of genuine Londoners. What is significant to the author’s stylistic growth is that, as he did in *The Rotten People*, Richler employs scatological diction and sexual innuendo to indicate the city’s corruption:

As Jake joined his father and mother [in Canada] ... to huddle around the radio and hear the great man say, ‘Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, “This was our finest hour,”’ Harry [in England], a ferret in search of novelty, ventured from ‘Mickey’s Shelter’ to fetid Tilbury, where around the

darkening bend in the tunnel you either unzipped yourself for a tart against the wall or squatted to defecate. Given unfavourable winds, the stench of urine and excrement was overpowering. (23)

Here, young Richler's *penchant* for sexual and scatological diction remains unimpeded. One reviewer remarks that, in *St. Urbain's Horseman*, Richler's "fancy sometimes runs to the noisome and malodorous" (Lask 2); here the "heaps of excrement" and "black-toothed Welsh whore" of *The Rotten People's* London appear almost unchanged in the "tart against the wall" and "stench of urine and excrement" with which the mature author darkens his metropolis. Lord Nelson, the "one-eyed admiral of another time and place" has been replaced by "the great man" Winston Churchill as the embodiment of British virtue, but they are both invoked as representatives of a fled social and political era that has been usurped by degeneracy and defilement. The fall of the "bomb-gutted ... victorious city" through German air raids is also given further treatment in *St Urbain's Horseman* when Jake, "With his bleeding colonial heart ... when he had first come to London ... asked everywhere about the blitz," but finds that the locals all "spoke longingly about the blitz" (21), furthering the gulf between his external Canadian conceptions of the war and the internal British perception of its reality, through imagery and diction.

Richler's construction of narrative frameworks that create suspense and hold the reader's interest – hallmarks of his later fiction – is also evident in *The Rotten People*, and constitutes another germinal aspect of his style: the opening of his novels *in medias res* (Latin for "into the middle of things"). *The Rotten People* begins with Kerman Adler in a shoddy hotel room in Paris, where he awakens from his recurring nightmare about

the city of London and its grotesque denizens. We learn that he suffers from a neurotic paranoia about rats when he visits his friend Henry to complain of his insomnia, and Henry replies, “The rats again?” (15). By commencing the novel with Kerman in a state of mental disrepair, Richler establishes the interest of the reader by offering no explanations for his condition, and thus encourages a sense of suspense in the narrative. Questions arise inevitably: why is Kerman lying on his bed, constantly afraid of “gnawing rats” (1)? Why does he suffer from insomnia and recurring nightmares? We are told that “It was the London nightmare again” (6) that plagues him, but why London, and why a nightmare? We do not know why Kerman is so disturbed by London; the nightmare set scene has not yet appeared. These intriguing details draw the reader forth into the arresting, phantasmagoric dreamscape which forms the novel’s first of many surrealistic set scenes, the five-page description Kafkaesque nightmare that creates the dark, threatening tone of the novel.

Some thirty years later in his career, Richler would open *Joshua Then and Now* with a parallel set of intriguing, unexplained oddities: at the opening of that novel, Joshua Shapiro lies prone in a hospital bed, “Lungs bubbling with blood whenever he took a breath” and suffering from “multiple fractures” and “cracked ribs” (3). The novel’s opening sentence invites the reader to “Look at me now, Joshua thought” (3), implying that the protagonist has somehow fallen from grace; as the title of the book suggests, it becomes an exploration of the past and present lives of the figure lying in the hospital bed. Again, as in *The Rotten People*, questions arise as the opening chapter progresses: why are there “men ... equipped with telephoto lenses, casting for Joshua Shapiro, Esquire” (4) in boats on the lake outside of his window? Why are there “Two old men ...



[guarding] against intruders,” one with “a shotgun resting on his lap” (4) outside of Joshua’s house? Clearly, the action in this novel has also begun *in medias res*, and many threads of narrative are already underway. The “reader’s curiosity about Joshua’s current plight is engaged from the opening page” (Ramraj 114), and the momentum of the narration carries readers forward, seeking for the answers to the puzzles.

While both novels demonstrate Richler’s stylistic facility to create suspense and maintain readerly interest through unresolved puzzles and intriguing circumstances, *Joshua Then and Now* displays a degree of improvement over *The Rotten People* that is largely measurable through the narrative’s increased subtlety and the author’s organic integration of the puzzles and symbolic clues into the plot of the text. In his first novel, young Richler overtly draws attention to the significance of his tortured protagonist’s symbols of neuroses: “Was there more meaning in the rats?” (229) Kerman asks himself at various points throughout the narrative, mechanically drawing our attention to the already obvious clues to the character’s insanity. On the final page, Kerman discovers that the rats have been hallucinations all along, an overt confirmation of his lunacy. However, in his mature period, Richler offers clues to the nature of Joshua’s crises in a far more subtle manner: “two weeks before his accident,” the narrator informs us, “before the letters had surfaced or anyone had accused him of being a closet queer, [Joshua was] sifting through the conundrums of a childhood that still bewildered him” (17). This quotation demonstrates how Joshua’s current problems are slowly and gradually brought to our attention; we are told that mysterious “letters had surfaced” and that he has been “accused of being a closet queer” for some unstated reason, but Richler still offers no distinct explanations for these clues. We know only that they are somehow

tied to the “conundrums of a childhood that confused him,” but again this insight only deepens our interest in the enigmatic causes of Joshua’s “accident.” While Kerman Adler is constructed as a “psycho-pathological personality” (Rau) through *The Rotten People*’s mechanical narrative, Richler’s portrayal of Joshua Shapiro’s rise to infamy is measured and organic.

In addition to the use of set pieces, symbolic imagery and diction, and *in medias res* openings, another hallmark of Richler’s style is his fondness for black humour. Critics have often described the “mischievously dark humour” (Yanofsky 159) of his novels, their “highly entertaining ... and often properly uncomfortable brand of satire” (Toynbee 109), and their “almost universally offensive” (Edwards 1) content. Although the predominant tone of *The Rotten People* is melancholic, and the text contains little of the acerbic but accommodating humour that we associate with novels such as *Barney’s Version*, there are humorous passages in the novel, and they demonstrate the roots of Richler’s blackly humorous voice. This black humour often sophomorically ridicules certain social issues and historical events of great importance in order to shock readers and challenge their accepted perspectives. For example, at one point in *The Rotten People*’s set scene entitled “The Party at Frank’s Place” (57-84), Jewish Kerman and communist Barney Larkin engage in a discussion about the role of art in a political society. Immediately preceding this interchange, another partygoer reflects privately that “all this communist business; don’t they have [anti-Semitic] pogroms in Russia all the same? Won’t they always hate [Jews], communism or no communism?” (83). Kerman’s flippant response to Barney’s political assertions echoes and intensifies the issue of communist anti-Semitism raised by the previous reflections:

LARKIN: I'm going to devote more of my time to politics. Art is the activity of neurosis: it will disappear in a well-ordered communist society.

(Frank laughs sarcastically.)

KERMAN: Yeah, we'll all disappear in a well-ordered communist society. (84)

Kerman's sarcastic comment that "we'll all disappear in a well-ordered communist society," with its undertones of the well-justified Jewish fear engendered by the Holocaust and Russian pogroms, makes light of the possibility that a new political regime, this time communist rather than fascist in nature, may well finish the genocidal work of the Nazis. Comments such as these anticipate Richler's use of black humour in later works such as the highly controversial satire *Cocksure*, in which the frivolous treatment of the tragic story of a minor character's mother who is murdered by the Nazis at the Treblinka concentration camp is reminiscent of Kerman's wisecrack:

Miss Fishman's mother was in fact the one-millionth Jew to be burned, not counting half or quarter Jews or babies under nine pounds before being flung into the ovens. This made for a very, very special occasion ... the burning of the one-millionth was one of the most ring-a-ding nights in the history of the Third Reich and to this day ... it is commemorated by survivors of that sentimental barbecue wherever they may be. (40)

This outrageously offensive passage is more severe and blackly satirical than anything in *The Rotten People*, although in tone, the "outlandishly black humour of *Cocksure*" (Yanofsky 193) and its running Treblinka gag is akin to Richler's first novel. Kerman

Adler's use of sarcasm to criticize genocide and its ideological adherents has grown into a far more violent and satirical treatment in *Cocksure*, yet *The Rotten People* demonstrates that Richler was unafraid to use irreverent and offensive material even at the outset of his career in order to challenge his readers' sensibilities. Similarly, *Cocksure's* use of the Holocaust to provide fodder for Richler's satirical cannon is sure to offend, and that of course is his likely intention.

Richler juxtaposes mundane, commonplace conversations with lofty philosophical musings in *The Rotten People*, and this tendency also survived well into his mature period. The technique of juxtaposition emphasizes the dualistic nature of his protagonists, who tend to be both participants in the everyday world and intellectual figures who are preoccupied with higher concerns. In several of *The Rotten People's* set-pieces (and elsewhere in the text), elevated theoretical reflections are mechanically interjected into routine dialogue on everyday topics. A characteristic example is to be found in the set piece entitled "The Party at Frank's Place", where the decadent partygoers' small talk is interrupted by their more profound inner thoughts:

FRANK: How do you like your new room?

KERMAN: It's a room. (Turning towards the table.) Haven't you got anything but red wine?

HE THOUGHT: In the beginning there was a Garden and a Man and a Woman and some trees. And above the Garden there was a big Sun and the Sun was God and shone down on the Man and the Woman in the Garden. The Man and Woman were naked, and could see each

other, and that they were different. And the Woman ate an apple from one of the trees and that was bad. ... (61)

The jarring shift from the chatter about drinks and lodgings into Kerman's mental philosophizing about the ethics of the biblical Genesis story simultaneously emphasizes the fatuousness of the party dialogue and the higher potential of the ruminative mind. With this shift, Richler demonstrates how the useless and irrelevant social functions which Kerman attends contribute to his mounting insanity, as his powerful intellect is wasted on small talk. The juxtaposition also serves the author as a convenient though unsubtle manner of imparting philosophical significance into a relatively thin narrative construction.

This precise technique of juxtaposing the mundane with the elevated appears without signs of noticeable artistic evolution in *Son of a Smaller Hero*, where Leah Adler's colloquial reminiscence of her son's childhood misadventure is mechanically interrupted by a narrative soliloquy on Jewish theology:

Remember that time, remember, when Noah had pneumonia? And how, I ask, did my Noah catch pneumonia? Fighting a whole class of boys yet. Why? Because they were throwing snowballs at Felder the rag peddler ...

\* \* \*

Man is the crown of creation. And when the Messiah comes all souls will flow together and return to be united with the Universal Soul, which is God. For the Evil One will be conquered and a New World Order will be established. ... (85)

The close stylistic resemblance of the *Rotten People* and *Son of a Smaller Hero* passages requires almost no critical explanation, so similar are they in tone and effect. The conversational rhythm and cadence of the former passages, and the offhand nature of their commentary clearly define them as belonging to the banal and worldly realm, while the declamatory tone of the latter excerpts, with their capitalized nouns and religious subject matter, plainly elevates them above the quotidian. Thus these juxtapositions compare and contrast the dual halves of the characters' natures, mundane and elevated, or worldly and spiritual. (This stylistic technique is also discussed in the opening chapter on Jewish identity.) Once again, Richler has somewhat mechanically contributed philosophical significance to an otherwise unremarkable passage in his novel, demonstrating the desire to elevate his narrative above simple storytelling into theoretical and intellectual reflection.

The use of characters' interjected inner thoughts and contemplative monologues has another stylistic function which Richler employs throughout his career: to contrast his primarily introverted characters with his extroverted figures.<sup>3</sup> In *The Rotten People*, characters such as Frank Hoover, the aspiring artist, are overwhelmingly contemplative, so Richler must confront the reader directly with his inner musings. We are told overtly that

FRANK THOUGHT: Soon they will come flocking, like pigeons begging for crumbs from the hand of the prophet in the marketplace, the virgins, the critics, the dilettantes and the rich, soon they will come flocking. *The recognition of genius*. For five years he lived in squalor in Paris, painting and painting, working without encouragement.

Frank Hoover, son of an alcoholic, the most original painter of our time. Hoover, shunned and trampled on by his family, betrayed and despised by his friends, Hoover is an original genius. (64)

This declaration of Frank's innermost aspirations and conceits leaves no room for readerly debate about his true character. Frank's conviction that he is "the most original painter of our time," though he has been "shunned and trampled on by his family," closely anticipates Duddy Kravitz's inner vow, written by Richler eight years later:

Look at me, he thought, take a good look because maybe I'm dirt now. Maybe I've never been to Paris and I don't know a painter from a horse's ass. ... Maybe I'm dirt today. ... But you listen here, kiddo. It's not always going to be like this. If you want to bet on something then bet on me. I'm going to be a somebody and that's for sure. (*The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* 95)

Richler depicts Duddy as primarily extroverted, yet passages such as these demonstrate the author allowing the reader glimpses at his character's private aspirations in order to establish a readerly response to the individual. In both *The Rotten People* and *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, the authorial presentation of Frank's and Duddy's pathetic, self-aggrandizing inner convictions that they will become famous and successful permit the reader to understand and evaluate the characters with a greater extent of insight than a strictly externalized depiction enables.

Certainly the novel that features the most extensive exploration of the dualistic nature of a character in Richler's *oeuvre* is *St. Urbain's Horseman*, whose twin protagonists, Jake and Joey Hersh, respectively symbolize binary qualities of human

nature: passive/active, introverted/extroverted, and cowardly/heroic.<sup>3</sup> Jake's comfortable but unremarkable life as a modestly successful film director is constantly held up against the daring and dangerous life that he imagines his absent cousin to lead. This constant comparison and contrast begins in the opening pages of the novel. Complacently enduring the routines of his safe but stifling middle-class existence, "Jake couldn't get back to sleep. So, careful not to disturb [his wife], he slid out of bed and into his dressing gown, sucking in his stomach to squeeze between the bed and the baby in the bassinet" (3-4). In Jake's imagination however, Joey hunts down Joseph Mengele with no indecision or regard for his personal safety: "The *Doktor* was reputed to keep armed bodyguards, maybe four of them. ... That doesn't matter, Jake thought. St. Urbain's Horseman will take him by surprise, gaining the advantage" (3). The juxtaposition of Jake's unexceptional domestic life as a considerate husband with a comfortably bulging stomach and a "baby in the bassinet" with the larger-than-life, brutal but gallant adventures of the Horseman, who "would extract the gold fillings from the triangular cleft between [Mengele's] upper front teeth with pliers" (3) continues, throughout the novel, to emphasize the dual nature of the modern individual's qualities. Jake, the introverted family man, vicariously acts out his fantasies of romance and adventure through his extroverted cousin's imaginary deeds.

The "London nightmare" set piece prominently employs slang, pejorative epithets and colloquial language to add verisimilitude to the passage – a further characteristic of Richler's diction that reappears in later novels. The use of terms such as "bobby" and "gaffer" in the depiction of the nightmarish London streetscape, and discriminatory racial labels such as "frogs," "dagos," and "krauts" (10) in the monologue of the "G.I.



Sargeant” (9-11) lends authenticity to the prose and provides a politically-incorrect chuckle at the incomprehensible ignorance of the military man. Similarly, in *Barney’s Version* the unapologetic political incorrectness of Barney Panofsky’s memoir helps to render him a truly unforgettable character. In a letter to his old friend and enemy Cedric Richardson (later known as Ismail ben Yussef), an African-American author and civil rights activist, Barney aims to infuriate by using terms such as “bloodsucker kike” for Jews, “ice-people” for whites and “n----- in the woodpile” (58-59). Barney also refers to his close friend and irreplaceable French-Canadian employee Solange Renault as “a *bona fide* pepper, a *pure laine* frog,” utilizing the epithets “pepper” and “frog” for the Quebecois woman, and he also tells her that “Your ancestors were stupid. They should have sold Quebec and kept Louisiana” (169). Barney’s use of epithets and his controversial assertions help to develop his irascible, curmudgeonly personality, and though the G.I. Sargeant’s ignorant rants merely establish him as one of the targets of Richler’s satire, *The Rotten People* clearly demonstrates that Richler understood the power of colloquial diction even in his youth.

In addition to colloquialisms, Richler utilizes phonetically spelled language to further the characterization of minor figures such as the G.I. Sargeant. The author reveals the Sargeant’s limitless ignorance through his ridiculous speeches, which include assertions that “Yuripeens ir all da same, y’see” (9) and “Londin’s O.K.; at least dey speak English dere” (10). Although this phonetic dialogue certainly demonstrates the idiocy and ethnocentrism of the American soldier, it is a literary technique which lacks subtlety in this passage. Richler displays a fondness for phonetic voices throughout *The Rotten People*, and this fondness continued throughout his career, as evidenced by his

depiction of French-Canadians in novels such as *Son of a Smaller Hero* and *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, most of whom speak in phonetically spelled accents. In one of *Son of a Smaller Hero*'s Montreal streetscapes, an urchin hawking the *Gazette* newspaper cries "GZET! Layst Noos! GZET! Payph! GZET! GZET!" (45), echoing his stylistic forebear, the G.I. Sargeant. Woodcock emphasizes this aspect of Richler's style in his assertion that "The inhabitants of the ghetto [in his novels] are depicted with a Dickensian eye for the foibles and tics of behaviour and speech" ("Son of a Smaller Hero" 18).

However, Richler in the later novels does not depend so excessively on fractured syntax and phonetic spelling to authenticate the dialect of his characters. He tends to give a literary rendition of dialect, focusing on capturing the rhythm and flow of the speech pattern rather than authenticity of sound by using fractured spelling, which is often difficult for the reader to follow. The exception to this general tendency is his liberal peppering of Yiddish terms and phrases throughout conversations between his Jewish characters. To Richler's Gentile readership, the Yiddish dialogue which he uses prominently in most of his major novels will likely appear unfamiliar and unintelligible, and therefore imbue the text with exoticism while demonstrating the author's intimate knowledge of his characters, their world, and their language, the "foibles and tics of behaviour and speech" identified by Woodcock as having been "depicted with a Dickensian eye." A heated conversation overheard in the London streets by Ephraim Gursky in *Solomon Gursky Was Here* aptly demonstrates Richler's use of Yiddish dialogue: "'Paskudnyak! Mamzer!' 'Hok mir nit kayn tchynik.' 'Ver derharget!'" (342). In *Barney's Version*, Barney encounters his son Saul in a Bohemian commune, and reacts

to his son's assertion that "'The pigs are filming all our rallies'" with the comforting advice, "'Saul, my boy, *abi gezunt*,'" and explains to a perplexed onlooker that "'It's a saying of our forefathers. You know, the slumlords of Canaan. It means, 'so long as your groovy'" (68). These Yiddish sayings and dialogue add readerly interest and verisimilitude to Richler's portrayals of both the characters and settings of his novels.

In his later works, Richler further authenticates setting through his use of place names. In *The Rotten People*, Richler also uses tourist-clichéd place names such as Old Kent Road, Trafalgar Square, and Westminster Abbey to substantiate his authorial knowledge of setting. The young author also loads his novel with the names of Parisian streets and cafes, as when "Kerman drifted languorously down Boulevard St. Germain to the Café Montparnasse" (77).<sup>4</sup> Richler's use of interesting foreign names and places in his first novel prefigures his construction of Joseph Hersh's exotic escapades in *St. Urbain's Horseman* and Barney Panofsky's idealized youth in the remembered Paris of *Barney's Version*, in that they all create settings that are glamorous, unconventional, and romantic.<sup>5</sup> Barney Panofsky's rose-coloured memories of his salad days in Europe are peppered with specific street and café names: "I was now," he writes, "able to afford all those fine restaurants I used to pass in 1951: Le Grand Véfour, Lapérouse, La Tour d'Argent, La Closerie des Lilas" (219). Later, pleading with his estranged wife, enticing her to accompany him to Europe, Barney presents a cornucopia of exotic European delights, demonstrating his intimate knowledge of the romantic locales of his youth: "'Bellinis in Harry's Bar. *Carpaccio. Fegato alla veneziana*. The Piazza San Marco. The Ponte Rialto. We'll stay at the Gritti Palace and hire a launch to take us to Cipriani's for lunch on Torcello'" (343). In *St. Urbain's Horseman*, the daring, imaginary exploits

of Jake Hersh's heroic cousin Joseph are similarly laden with exotic locales; Jake imagines his cousin hunting Joseph Mengele at "an unmarked road in the jungle, between Puerto San Vincente and the border fortress of Carlos Antonio Lopez, on the Parana River" (3).

Yet another germinal aspect of Richler's style – the prominent use of grotesque figures – is evident in the London nightmare passage. Grotesques including the "hollow-eyed spiv with a No face" (6), "black-toothed Welsh whore" (7), and "legless orphan with a bent arm and his nose on sideways" (8) all contribute to the disturbing, surrealistic atmosphere of Richler's fallen metropolis. In *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, at the peak of his powers, the mature author offers a remarkable portrait of Victorian London in his most fully realized and extensively developed streetscape. His liberal use of grotesques strongly recalls the denizens of *The Rotten People*'s urban nightmare: "ragged boys", "grim men in bobbing black top hats", "an emaciated old beggar ... with trembling hands" and "sodden sailors laying in pools of their own piss" (*Solomon Gursky* 335-36) greet the young Ephraim Gursky who, like Kerman Adler, ventures to the British capitol to escape his provincial and stifling home town. The grotesques in both instances suggest the threatening and unexpected street realities that neither protagonist fully anticipates encountering at his destination; in both novels, their preconceptions of the glorious city of London is swiftly proven false by the horrifying reality of the street. In *Cocksure*, Richler paints the enigmatic antagonist The Star Maker as a horribly grotesque figure, a modern Frankenstein's monster constructed from a "mobile hospital of spare parts men at [his] beck and call" (235), again utilizing physical deformity and repugnance to establish the menace faced by the protagonist.

Richler's masterful use of dialogue, another of his prominent stylistic strengths, can be detected in its infancy in *The Rotten People*. Ray Smith asserts that "Dialogue has always been one of Richler's most deadly weapons," and that his "characters are skewered and revealed with a phrase, a sentence" (206). Although this mastery would not be fully achieved until Richler wrote *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, early indications of the author's potential abound in his first novel. The young Richler is, even at this early stage, able to convey an enormous amount of personal and ideological information with a few brief statements in the manner described by Smith. In "The Party at Frank's Place," Richler swiftly and effectively encapsulates a wealth of information in just one sentence from the pompous, committed communist, Barney Larkin:

"We were talking about Ibiza and cheap living, I think," said Kerman.

Molly smiled listlessly. "You're not going to Spain now, are you?"

"I don't know."

Larkin wagged his huge head in ponderous disapproval. "I didn't think any of us, *even you*, would go to Spain and give dollars to Franco."

(71-72)

Larkin's personal haughtiness and ideological arrogance bleed through his patronizing remark to Kerman. In the narrative context of the cocktail party, Larkin's horrified condemnation of Franco and the fascist ideology that he symbolizes is usurped by his rude dismissal of Kerman as a political and social nonentity who cares nothing about political concerns, which in Larkin's mind is anathema. Richler manages to persuade his readers to react negatively to the arrogant character, even though it is Kerman rather than

Larkin who is the subject of the political criticism. Larkin's disdainful "*even you*" is an example of the ability Smith recognizes in Richler to "skewer" characters with a single utterance.

Perhaps the most poignant and revealing example of Richler's loaded dialogue is to be found in the poignant *dénouement* of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, where Duddy and Jake Hersch discuss the indiscretions of their youth. In this, one of a host of brilliant pieces of dialogue in that novel, the author conveys an enormous body of insight into the fragile egos and troubled psyches of two of his favourite characters:

"Are you going to cry again?" [Jake asks Duddy.]

"Naw. I'm awright. Honest. Listen, there's something I want to ask you. I – about MacPherson. It's true, I made the phone call. His wife died, you know."

"Look, we were kids then. How were you to know – "

"We used to phone them all the time, didn't we? All the guys did.

*You never phoned."*

"I was something of a sissy in those days." (260)

This interchange is so laden with emotional and psychological significance that it can almost be close-read as poetry. Jake's discomfort at seeing Duddy cry, Duddy's tortured conscience at his former ruthlessness, the willingness of a childhood friend to assume blame in order to comfort his friend, one man's admiration of another's unwavering morals, and the other's embarrassment at his own perceived timidity are all beautifully encapsulated in a few brief statements. The use of dialogue in this novel is undoubtedly one of the characteristics that justify critics' elevated descriptions of the novel as

“unquestionably, one of his masterpieces” (Davidson 81) and “still the best of the novels in which Richler unleashed a great comic talent” (Woodcock 37).

Richler’s considerable dexterity with language, which is apparent even at the age of nineteen in *The Rotten People* (completed in 1951), grew into a veritable mastery of dialogue, demonstrable through interchanges such as the preceding quotation, by the time *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* was published in 1959. Along with *The Rotten People*’s highly effective establishment of setting, its dialogue is perhaps the greatest strength of the novel, and contributes to the few episodes of comic relief in the text. At one point, Richler memorably depicts Kerman and his lover Helen reminiscing about the uncomfortable topic of his mother’s extramarital affair with the German refugee:

“Do you remember Schnitzer?” [Asks Helen.]

“What in the hell is this? Remembrance day! Of course I remember Schnitzer: how could I ever forget that bastard?”

“I met him a couple of months ago. He’s married and has a child.”

“Good for him,” he said. “I hope the child drowns and Schnitzer has a heart attack when he finds out.” (91)

I perceive a quality in this interchange that closely anticipates the “comedy of insult” (Schilling 147) which in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* reaches even more ludicrous heights of comic effectiveness. Duddy at one point approaches a local Jewish businessman, Mr. Cohen, for a loan:

“I want forty-five hundred dollars.”

“Azoï.”

“I’ll pay interest.”

“Duddy, if you’re on to something good and it’s too big for you to handle tell me about it. I might be interested. But to lend you money at interest – Phooey.”

Boil in acid, Duddy thought. I hope all your teeth fall out. And the one that’s left should give you a toothache for life. (289)

The hyperbolic curses that Duddy wishes upon Mr. Cohen, which are “ludicrously out of proportion to the offense” (Ramraj 31), distinctly echo Kerman Adler’s desire that Schnitzer’s child should drown and that he should have “a heart attack when he finds out.” These echoes of *The Rotten People*, which are to be found in all of Richler’s major works, demonstrate that the earliest examples of his distinctive style of comic dialogue are found in his first novel.

Richler at nineteen years of age had yet to polish and perfect his stylistic strengths, but with his first novel he laid the foundation for the future works, which improved with each successive text. His use of set pieces, mechanical but memorable in *The Rotten People*, ultimately attains maturity in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *St. Urbain’s Horseman*; the sporadic use of black humour in his first novel culminates in the consistent, surreal absurdity of *Cocksure*; his use of colloquialisms and phonetic dialogue, which in the earliest fiction are unsubtle and over-the-top, become more measured and literary in *Solomon Gursky Was Here*. His grotesques, which merely shock and repulse in *The Rotten People*, grow into the intriguing and unusual street denizens that make Richler’s depiction of Victorian London so convincing and memorable. His deft construction of dialogue, so loaded with significance and comic power even in this first novel, allowed him to succeed as a writer of many film and



television scripts, including those of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *Joshua Then and Now*. Initially, *The Rotten People* appears to be jarringly out of context in terms of Richler's literary style, yet comparisons such as those I present above disprove the notion that this unpublished novel bears little relation to the mature author's works. In his first novel, Richler begins the growth of the fine stylistic qualities which ultimately characterize his best fiction.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tim Lehnert expresses his belief that “The writerly aspects of Richler's fiction, of how he creates meaning at the level of language, have often been overlooked” (1).

<sup>2</sup> Heather Mallick notes Richler's “obsession - this is not too strong a word - with excretion” (1) in *Barney's Version*.

<sup>3</sup> Ramraj observes a significant stylistic discrepancy between the author's use of inner monologues in the books *Son of a Smaller Hero* and *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* where “Duddy's inner life ... is not revealed to the reader as incisively or explicitly as is Noah's ... not because Duddy does not experience conflicts and doubts, but because Richler perceives Duddy as someone constantly externalized, unlike the contemplative Noah” (35).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Lask asserts that “Joey is a prismatic figure. We see him only in refracted light, and what he is depends on which end of the spectrum you are scrutinizing. To the older generation, he is pure poison and a blot on the Jewish community. ... Nevertheless he is Jake's hero and conscience. For whatever else Joey is, he is no coward” (1).

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps in literary homage to the novels of his professed hero, Ernest Hemingway, of whom he writes that “I wanted to write like Malraux or Hemingway, and, unfortunately, that's exactly what I tried in my first novel” (Broadside 5), Richler imparts through Hemingway's established style the sophisticated, worldly air that Richler at times seems so anxious to portray. Hemingway, in his autobiographical memoir *A Moveable Feast*, displays this fondness for Parisian place names, and it is not terribly difficult to discern the stylistic quality that Richler emulates in his first novel: “The

Closerie des Lilas,” Hemingway writes, “was the nearest good café when we lived in the flat over the sawmill at 113 rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs” (81). Although Richler’s novel predates Hemingway’s memoir, the latter text is indicative of Hemingway’s familiar pre-Richler style.

## Conclusion –

### *The Rotten People: A Summary*

I argue throughout my thesis that *The Rotten People* is a seminal text in Richler's *oeuvre*. The author appears to have disagreed; he declined to publish *The Rotten People* even after his considerable success as a popular and respected literary novelist created a demand for his work. He was apparently embarrassed by its imperfections and the immaturity of its style in comparison with his more fully realized fiction. However, when he contributed his papers to the University of Calgary library, he included both drafts of the unpublished novel, and therefore must have certainly understood that researchers there would one day unearth the text and subject it to academic scrutiny. In fact, his final editor remarked that shortly before his death, Richler advised her that "if she ever published *The Rotten People* he would come back and haunt her" (Dennys). This comment indicates awareness on the author's part that public and scholarly interest in his early works was substantial enough potentially to prompt his publishers to release this unpublished text to the world. It also indicates that Richler strongly objected to this idea.

In Richler's penultimate novel, *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, popular writer Moses Berger (yet another pseudo-Richler protagonist) picks a volume from his bookshelf at random, and opens it to these words from critic Cyril Connolly:

"The more books we read," it began, "the sooner we perceive that the true function of the writer is to produce a masterpiece and that no other task is of any consequence. Obvious though this should be, how few writers will

admit it, or having made the admission, will be prepared to lay aside the piece of iridescent mediocrity on which they have embarked!” (188)

Moses’ reply to Connolly’s statement is “Well, fuck you, Cyril” (188), an irreverence which certainly smacks of authorial intervention and well characterizes Richler’s attitude toward unforgiving critics. Though it is most certainly not a masterpiece, *The Rotten People* should not remain in total obscurity, hidden from the eyes of all but the most dedicated scholars and enthusiasts. It is the germinal quality of this novel that establishes it as an important starting point for understanding and appreciating the formal and thematic characteristics that we associate with the author.

There is unquestionably further research to be done on Richler’s growth as a novelist. I feel that, more than any other Canadian author I have studied, the quality of Richler’s fiction grows demonstrably from novel to succeeding novel, and this steady improvement continues unabated until he achieves undeniable excellence in *Solomon Gursky Was Here* and *Barney’s Version*, his final novel. The other major works – *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *Cocksure*, *The Street*, *St. Urbain’s Horseman*, *Joshua Then and Now* – can be retrospectively traced back through a progression of growth into the early works which, though they tend to compare rather poorly to the mature novels, once again encapsulate germinal qualities. *The Rotten People*, *The Acrobats*, *Son of a Smaller Hero*, *A Choice of Enemies* and *The Incomparable Atuk* do not stand alone as accomplished novels, but it is by evaluating them from the perspective of readers familiar with the later, more successful texts that their importance becomes apparent. *The Rotten People*, as Richler’s first novel and the work least explored by critics, is in this regard the most significant of any of his early novels.

I began by demonstrating that Richler's recurring fictional explorations of life as a modern Jewish man have their roots in *The Rotten People*. Richler, the Jewish novelist, never ceased to produce fiction that examines and evaluates the strengths and shortcomings of the traditions of his people. Certainly, these explorations garnered him as much or more controversy and animosity as praise from the Jewish community, but his unwillingness to romanticize or sentimentalize Jewish life remained unchecked for the duration of his career. *The Rotten People*, with its portrayal of the young, tortured, self-conscious, self-hating sensitive Jewish expatriate Kerman Adler, creates the archetypal protagonist that resurfaces throughout Richler's best novels. This archetypal struggling Jew manifests himself as Noah Adler, Duddy Kravitz, the narrator of *The Street*, Jake Hersh, Joshua Shapiro, Moses Berger, and finally Barney Panofsky, each time in a slightly more mature, slightly more individual form. Richler's protagonists, demonstrably rooted in autobiographical material, constitute a cyclical return to the fictional territory that proved such a fruitful muse to the author. As the novels progress, his central figures evolve from being simply Jews obsessed with their Jewishness like Kerman Adler to the more fully rounded Jewish men exemplified by Joshua Shapiro. Joshua's story, which overtly revisits and reinterprets the story and character of Kerman Adler, displays a remarkable evolution both of thematic complexity and authorial effectiveness. *The Rotten People* encapsulates the central, Jewish tensions of *Joshua Then and Now*, and closely anticipates that fine novel.

In addition to its germinal exploration of Jewish identity, *The Rotten People's* anti-*Bildungsroman* theme and semi-autobiographical narrative also prefigure Richler's later novels. Again drawing liberally from his own life and experiences, Richler's

portrayal of Kerman Adler and his struggle to find himself in Europe establishes a pattern that future protagonists follow closely. Kerman's confused and aimless youth, spent drifting aimlessly from European capitol to capitol, Parisian café to café, lover to lover, unable to define a worthy set of moral and ethical standards to emulate, anticipates the similarly aimless and dysfunctional adolescence of figures such as Joshua Shapiro and the narrator of *The Street*. Kerman's problematic relationships, both with his family and friends and with the society in which he merely exists, is the initial fictional representation of the modern individual's *ennui* that Richler revisits in his more mature period in *The Street* and *Joshua Then and Now*. The many demonstrably autobiographical incidents with which Richler constructs Kerman's life that reappear in *The Street* are a further aspect of *The Rotten People*'s germinal status.

Finally, though it is perhaps the least readily apparent aspect of his first novel's anticipatory qualities, Richler's idiosyncratic style of prose also finds its first expression in *The Rotten People*. Despite the unpolished and undeveloped use of such characteristic Richlerian stylistic features as the set scene, colloquial language, romantic place names, scatological diction, grotesque figures, black humour, and masterfully written dialogue, these facets present themselves to the informed reader, and appear with greater distinctness when passages from *The Rotten People* are compared with excerpts from the mature fiction. Richler's use of various modes of dualism, which in *The Rotten People* is limited primarily to juxtapositions of sacred and profane musings and introverted and extroverted characters, would culminate in the highly complex and multifaceted binary explorations of character that function in *St. Urbain's Horseman* and *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. As in *Joshua Then and Now*, the plot and structure of the narrative of

*The Rotten People* is episodic and commences *in medias res*, demonstrating a formal as well as thematic relationship to his later works. *The Rotten People*'s use of dialogue, its symbolism, and its phantasmagoric nightmare imagery are certainly among its greatest strengths, although they too compare inadequately to the mature novels, and Richler was ultimately able to develop these strengths to an impressive degree throughout his career.

My thesis is an initial step toward what I hope will eventually constitute an inclusive critical study of Mordecai Richler's fiction. I have identified several avenues for future research into his novels, and though these topics are neither relevant nor desirable in the context of this thesis, I feel that they are a rich ground for critical endeavour. I believe that *The Rotten People* will remain as an important background text for studies of the author's more accomplished novels, and I feel that the thematic and formal characteristics on which I focus in this work have yet to be exhausted as subjects for speculative inquiry. I have a distinct benefit in being the first critic to examine this novel, although as such I have had to draw original comparisons to later works which themselves have not drawn the degree of critical attention that I feel their quality warrants. By commencing my study of Richler's fiction with *The Rotten People*, I am able to view and analyze much of his life's work from its earliest roots to his mature masterpieces. The death of Richler in 2001 impoverished Canadian literature, but may also signal the beginning of a new phase in the critical examination of his *oeuvre*. *The Rotten People* is not Richler's best novel, nor is it his most intellectually massive or comically amusing, but it contains, if only germinally, those significant hallmarks which made him such an accomplished, humorous, and satisfying author.



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### **Appendix: *The Rotten People* Transcription**

The following pages are a portion of a project submitted by myself to Dr. Richard C. Davis in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the course “English 684.01: Archival Manuscripts - Canadian Literature” at the University of Calgary, 2003-04. All copyright is maintained by the Richler Estate. These excerpts are intended only to facilitate comprehension of my thesis. This appendix presents a clear text version of the selected passages; editorial authority Mary-Jo Kline aptly expresses the rationale for the selection of a clear text edition in her book *A Guide to Documentary Editing*: “clear text is a practical option for documents that are themselves close to final versions of the documents that they represent. ... fair copies of literary manuscripts ... [are] clean enough to serve for clear text” (167). Kline also rightly indicates that “the extent of editorial intervention is so slight and of so little substantive importance” (167) in documents such as *The Rotten People* manuscript that there is little value to be gained through extensive editorial intrusion.

Owing to copyright limitations on cited material in theses, and in accordance with the agreement reached between the Richler Estate and the University of Calgary, only 250 words per excerpt of transcribed text appear in this appendix.

\*       \*       \*

#### **The London Nightmare**

The “London nightmare” will be partially familiar to Richler enthusiasts. Those acquainted with *The Acrobats* will likely recognize the first three pages of this passage from the dénouement of that work. I have selected these five pages not only because they appear early in the text, but also because they effectively represent the characteristic style

of the work as a whole, as the later transcribed passages will verify. They introduce *The Rotten People*'s protagonist, Kerman Adler, and launch the anguished exploration of his troubled psyche that forms the novel's primary narrative. This passage is also significant as it establishes the setting for most of the novel, namely the post-World War Two European capitals (in this case London), and demonstrates the young author developing his considerable powers of description. Stylistically, echoes of Franz Kafka's nightmarish metropolises ring through the text; London's denizens are presented in full degenerate regalia, and a profound sense of both moral and physical decay is evident. In the latter pages of the excerpt, Richler displays one of the earliest examples of his satiric voice as he lampoons the boorish American "G.I. Sargeant" who flaunts his ignorance and ethnocentrism through political and social commentaries.

\*       \*       \*

It was the London nightmare again.

... A real empty stomach and a rotting soul  
flaking at the sides walked love and love through  
the purple bomb-gutted streets of the victorious  
city. The yellow pasteboard moon hanging like a  
bright lollypop in the big blue sky illuminated a  
building on Old Kent Road. From the other side  
the building was really only a wall. While  
waiting for the fall of the man who had entered a  
window on the fourth storey of the building that  
was only a wall a stinging hose of urine ran down  
Kerman's right trouser leg. The man must have

never quite fallen to the bottom as he stood  
 there and stood there for three whole weeks  
 without ever hearing a goddamn sound. The fetor  
 of his own dry urine mixed with the floating  
 ambrosial stink of the dead violet flowers being  
 pumped on to the pavement through the drainpipes.  
 Ernie, hollow-eyed spiv with a No face, sold  
 American-made nylons on Trafalgar Square.

A perfume advert, posted in neon dream blood  
 over the Haymarket.

*Out of the heavens - to you!*

MY SIN

de inez blumberg

Ernie ruined at least three pairs when a  
 sore burst under his thumbnail and running green  
 pus cascaded over the silk in a blinding viscous  
 fountain. From the top of his colonnade a one-  
 eyed admiral of another time and place tottered  
 precariously as the pigeons heaped still more  
 piles of excrement on the gawking tourists below.

... (6-7)

\* \* \*



### **The Party at Frank's Place**

Following some fifty pages after the “London nightmare”, “The Party at Frank's Place” develops several of the themes introduced therein. This passage introduces all of the major characters in the text and establishes their attitudes and ideological perspectives. Here Richler's avant-garde narrative experimentation reaches its climax; he makes extensive use of surrealism-influenced Modernist techniques. These include the sporadic use of the dramatic format of quotation, Joycean streams of consciousness, and morose Kafkaesque urban imagery. Richler's fond though often awkward use of repetitive sentences beginning with “And” is arguably attributable to Hemingway's influence. The source document presented many transcriptional challenges, as the author erratically switches voices and personae, and also utilizes inconsistent formatting. Although there are several disjointed lines of narrative that run throughout the party, perhaps the most bizarre is the “play within a play” in which personifications of life and death visit the characters and converse with them. Other bizarre elements include the various bastardizations of the biblical story of the Garden of Eden presented by the various figures at the party. Of thematic interest are the recurrent images of dead, dying, and otherwise corrupted mothers and children, whose significance is further explored in the next excerpt. Also, this passage begins the exploration of Jewish identity and its attendant challenges that occupy much of the novel.

\*       \*       \*

There is a knock at the door.

Enter KERMAN ADLER.

He is a youth with a lean, drawn face and frantic brown eyes. The deep eyes are overshadowed by tufts of bushy eyebrow that never quite taper out but meet in the "V" over his nose. His colouring is pale and his nose is far too long, jutting out impudently from his face. His worst feature is his thick lips: they betray a deep sensuality, and suggest self-indulgence. He is exceedingly vain about his long, unruly crop of thick brown hair and it is seldom properly cut and less often combed. Of medium height, his body is thin and awkward: the legs being much too long and the chest far too narrow. He has never grown used to his body and can neither walk nor sit properly. The total impression is always comic: a big, nervous head attached to an uneven, concave trunk, and thin, dangling legs.

(Kerman overlooks the hostility in Frank's pinpoint eyes and collapses into a nearby chair.)

FRANK: How do you like your new room?

KERMAN: It's a room. (Turning towards the table.) Haven't you got anything but red wine?

HE THOUGHT: In the beginning there was a Garden and a Man and a Woman and some trees. And above the Garden there was a big Sun and the Sun was God and shone down on the Man and the Woman in the Garden. . . . (60-61)

\* \* \*

### **What is Kerman?**

For academic readers possessed of a strong familiarity with Richler's *oeuvre*, the following excerpt will be of particular interest. Contained within these pages of transcription are germs of several of the author's most memorable stories and incidents. These juvenile treatments of familiar narratives offer critics and enthusiasts a remarkable opportunity to compare the style of the young author with his mature voice. Depictions that Richlerites will likely recognize include the tale of the gangrenous grandmother, which appeared in 1969's *The Street*, and the account of the German Jewish refugees which also appeared in that work, as well as other brief reflections which have manifested in various forms throughout Richler's novels. Of additional interest to critics and enthusiasts is the preponderance of thinly veiled autobiographical material in the text. At the age of nineteen, Richler was apparently exorcising personal demons through the composition of *The Rotten People*. Several of the incidents that the author uses to explore the formative years of protagonist Kerman Adler correspond closely with accounts furnished by Richler's biographer, Michael Posner. Comparative readings of

*The Last Honest Man: Mordecai Richler* and *The Rotten People* are fascinating and worthy avenues for future research.

This brief excerpt introduces Kerman's experiences with a Jewish refugee from Germany named "Schnitzer" who creates tension in the Adler household.

\* \* \*

#### A Short Digression

WHAT IS KERMAN? ...

b) The Second Kerman.

Now the second Kerman is another thing. This section is going to be a real treat for masturbating adolescents and passionate old maid virgin members of the book clubs. As a matter of fact, loosen your girdles girls (you great big culture lovers you) and unbutton your flies kids, this is where things begin to get hot. ...

The refugees, Kerman's father said at the time holding his head between his hands, it's all the refugees' fault. They put ideas in her head. If not for the refugees she never would have divorced me. What did I do anyway, Kerman? (He always told these things to Kerman.) It's not as if I ran around with other women. The refugees and worst of all Schnitzer!

... worst of all Schnitzer. ...

Mrs. Adler fell in love with Schnitzer, and Schnitzer (who was a lot of things but most of all an opportunist) thought Mrs. Adler was a pretty good lay.

Besides, he had a wife in Berlin.

I want a divorce, she said. You never earned a living for me. Look your younger brother is a partner in the business and you only drive a truck.

He came in when times were good. He was lucky. My father had to make him a partner. Besides I'm a partner too.

You are not.

I am.

You aren't.

I'm.

You are you aren't you are I am you I.

You're afraid of your father and you're a truck driver. (113-120)

\* \* \*

### **What is a Jew?**

The excerpt entitled "What is a Jew?" is of interest to both literary critics and students of Religious Studies. In this remarkable passage, Richler explores the tortured

mind of a post-Holocaust Jew who struggles to comprehend the atrocities of the Nazis and the painful history of Jewish persecution. The author examines in excruciating detail the causes and effects of anti-Semitism, and explores the various social manifestations of racial and religious prejudice. Incredibly, this unique literary response to the Holocaust predates most of the significant treatments of that theme, including Elie Wiesel's *Night*, which was not published until 1960, almost a decade after *The Rotten People* was written. Perhaps the single most extraordinary facet of this passage is the scope and maturity of the subject matter when one considers the youth of its author. Jewish identity and the insoluble dilemmas of life as a modern Jew are among the primary motifs of the novel as a whole, and indeed of Richler's entire body of work.

Stylistically, Richler continues to experiment with various Modernist techniques, and in this segment arguably uses them with the most effectiveness of any passage in the work. Of the four set pieces excerpted in this work, "What is a Jew?" represents the most fully integrated combination of the working and clean drafts of the novel, as this passage underwent heavy revision and thus required fastidious editorial examination. Below is my best approximation of the young author's final intentions.

\*       \*       \*

What is a Jew?

Sometimes - like then in Victoria Station -  
when the only better thing Kerman has to do would  
be to pick his nose he instead asks himself what  
is a Jew?

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* which is a  
digest of the 2 volume *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*

which is the companion to a still larger academic monstrosity of umpteen volumes says, quote, "Jew 1, n. Person of Hebrew race; (transf., colloq.) extortionate usurer, driver of hard bargains; *rich as a jew; unbelieving jew; incredulous person; tell that\_*(an unlikely tale) *to the jews;* Jew 2, v.t. (colloq.), cheat, overreach (prec.)," unquote. And so much for the ultra-objective bible of sterile academics in England and America and all ships at sea.

*What is a Jew* the snarling anti-Semite unemployed labourer snarls under a lamp post or in a bar: A jew is a kike is a yid is a hebe is a bastard is everything that is keeping me out of a job is screwing everything up generally is the cause of the last war and all the other last wars and a few of the next. (And you should pardon me Gertie but it makes a hell of a lot more sense this way.)

Add a few shorties.

A Jew say the people - who of course aren't like you and me - are all the communists.

A Jew all the communists say when they are not being professionally broadminded are all the

capitalists and something (like niggers) it's  
good to have in the party and treat equal no  
matter what you think because it's damn good  
policy. (214-215)

\* \* \*