

Solomon Gursky Was Here A History by Hunger

In H.G. Wells' 1909 novel *Tono-Bungay*, a new-moneyed Londoner indulges his imaginative appetites in the building of a country mansion:

All the world has heard of that extravagant place which grew and changed plans as it grew, and bubbled like a salted snail, and burgeoned and bulged and evermore grew. I know not what delirium of pinnacles and terraces and arcades and corridors glittered at last in the uplands of his mind. . . . At another time he caught a suggestion from some city restaurant and made a billiard-room roofed with plate glass beneath the waters of his ornamental lake. (270-71)

A story of newfound wealth and class transit will usually give the reader access to the shows of affluence put on by its characters, however disapproving the book itself is of such conspicuousness. In *The Way We Live Now*, more or less the originary novel of finance, the tycoon Augustus Melmotte advertises his material situation by inviting the Emperor of China to dinner, while Anthony Trollope's narrator advertises his own *class* status by pointedly *not* noticing what Melmotte serves at table—and by larking those attentive characters who do avail the reader of that information. Eighty years after *Tono-Bungay*, Mordecai Richler tells us of another financial ascendancy, this one up the slopes of Mount Royal:

The three Gursky brothers had built neighbouring fieldstone mansions on the Montreal mountainside . . . once through the wrought-iron gates, an awestruck Moses, totally unprepared by his father, was confronted with undreamed-of splendour.

There was an enormous swimming pool. A heated, multi-level tree house, designed by an architect and furnished by an interior decorator. A miniature railway. A hockey rink, the boards thickly padded. (24-25)

But if, as we read Richler's description, we feel a twinge of vicarious gratification, or, like the young observer, of jealousy, we are not simply debasing ourselves before some more abstemious authorial sensibility. In fact, the inevitability of our jealousy, our desire for gratification, is precisely what the book is about.

Edward Ponderevo, Wells' Englishman, and Bernard Gursky, Richler's Canadian, both represent historical intensifications in capitalist materialism. Both are ruthlessly ambitious, spurred by a sense of class inferiority, and both make their fortunes in related ways: in small glass bottles, and also, in despite of ethical consensus. Gursky, an unflattering riff on Samuel Bronfman, is a distiller and bootlegger. Ponderevo, after some experimentation, succeeds in branding a runaway health tonic, the eponymous Tono-Bungay. But Ponderevo is plainly and simply a fraud. Tono-Bungay is not as advertised, in fact does nothing, something nobody to my knowledge has said about Seagram's. With that characteristic enthusiasm of the earlier twentieth century for foundational dichotomies, Wells' book makes its tycoon both a proprietor and a victim of false consciousness:

[H]e had a controlling influence in the direction of nearly thirty millions. The irrational muddle of a community in which we live gave him that, paid him at that rate for sitting in a room and scheming and telling it lies. For he created nothing, he invented nothing, he economized nothing. I cannot claim that a single one of the great businesses we organized added any real value to human life at all. (220)

Just as his services are unnecessary, so are his compulsions. Once he has the money to do so, Ponderevo feels compelled to act an absurd, predetermined class part: "We got to get samples of all the blessed wines there are, and learn 'em up. Stern, Smoor, Burgundy, all of 'em! . . . Learn up golf and tennis and things. Country Gentleman. Oh fay" (241).¹ The financier's adventures are narrated by his nephew George, who begins as his partner in crime but is gradually pulled away in his pursuit of the perfect flying machine. George is Edward's foil, an ascetic disciple of the radical real of science:

Scientific truth is the remotest of mistresses; she hides in strange places, she is attained by tortuous and laborious roads, but *she is always there!* Win to her and she will not fail you; she is yours and mankind's for ever. She is reality, the one reality I have found in this strange disorder of existence. She will not sulk with you nor misunderstand you nor cheat you of your reward upon some petty doubt. You cannot change her by advertisement or clamour, nor stifle her in vulgarities. (277)

But Richler's hero, a scholar named Moses Berger who has ruined his prospects with drunkenness, cannot stand so aloof. *Solomon Gursky was Here* is about appetites—for mansions, or better, for whiskey—which cannot

be ignored, never mind the warp of cultural valuation and prohibition. Hunger, in the unremittingly anatomical sense, is the book's guiding figure. Dating as it does to 1989, *Gursky* is by no means any happy manifesto for the "greed is good" epoch. Bernard Gursky, who enjoys surreptitiously salting the food of heart-conscious employees, is decidedly less likeable than Edward Ponderevo, and Berger certainly likes him less than George does his uncle. But before pronouncing this novel, even in its most excoriating moments, a corrective attack on the wicked, we ought to consider the more intransigent ethical problems that arise from the figures of consumption and appetite. With a sense of entrapment, of endgame inevitability singular in Richler's work and noteworthy among laments of the gaudy marketplace, *Gursky* details a kind of greed which, though impossible to dismiss as unnatural or even evitable, we are nonetheless never permitted to condone. In its billed role as Richler's epic, *Gursky* is also a comment upon more particularly national forms of moral self-identification. As Charles Foran notes in his recent biography, Richler himself described the book as "fat and filthy" (533). These, to a considerable extent, are the adjectives *Gursky* will not let Canadians deny themselves.

The nuclear story from which the larger observations of the novel radiate is that of a family, and particularly, of a family consuming itself. Ephraim Gursky, an English-born Jew, emerges mysteriously from the Canadian Arctic in about the middle of the nineteenth century. He leaves a son, Aaron, in Saskatchewan. Aaron gives Ephraim three grandchildren, Bernard, Solomon, and Morrie. These three become bootleggers, and begin to amass a fortune, but not before Ephraim alerts his favoured grandson Solomon to the insatiable maliciousness of his brother. After pointing out the voracity of an arctic wolf, Ephraim asks:

"Do you understand?"

"Sure I do."

"No, you don't. I'm trying to warn you about Bernard." (38)

Sure enough, Bernard gives the Gursky story its most obvious nudge into transgressive indulgence. Jealous over money and status, he saddles Solomon with legal blame for the family's collective smuggling operations. Solomon avoids incarceration by disappearing, apparently dying in a flying accident, while control of the family business, now legitimated as McTavish Distillers, falls to Bernard. Things get more cannibal: Bernard's children battle with Morrie's over influence in the company, and attempt to deceive Solomon's naively religious son Henry into giving up his shares. Solomon's daughter

Lucy becomes first a drug addict, and then a binge eater, “gorging herself on platters of unhatched chicken eggs, *kishka*, and flank steak” (534). Most disturbing is the case of Isaac Gursky, Henry’s son and Solomon’s grandson. After a snowmobile accident kills his father and leaves him stranded in the Arctic without food, Isaac is rescued by a bush pilot. He has only survived, the pilot recounts, “by slicing chunks out of Henry’s thighs” (526).

Very probably, Isaac has no choice. He had, after all, to eat something. But the implacability of his need is shocking, unacceptable, registers as a cultural rupture. The rebbes at the yeshiva he attends in New York are awestruck: “How could you do such a thing? . . . But your own father, *alay ha-sholem?*” Isaac’s claim that it was better to eat Henry than his Netsilik travelling companion since “The other one was *trayf*” does little to mollify them (528). Isaac’s appetites continue to put him at odds with Jewish ritual purity. Already, Henry has taken him to task for eating like the other boys in the Arctic town of his raising.

He found him hidden behind an oil drum chewing greedily on a raw seal’s eye, sucking the goodness out of it. “You musn’t,” Henry chided him, tenderly wiping the blood off his chin with a handkerchief. “It’s not kosher. It’s unclean, *yingele. Trayf.*” (97)

After his father’s death, Isaac takes to cannabis. He is eventually expelled from his school for sex with his cleaning lady.

In the chapter of *The Periodic Table* named “Potassium,” Primo Levi gives a multiply resonant account of his work as a chemist in Fascist Italy.

Distilling is beautiful. First of all, because it is a slow, philosophic, and silent occupation . . . purity is attained, an ambiguous and fascinating condition, which starts with chemistry and goes very far. And finally, when you set about distilling, you acquire the consciousness of repeating a ritual consecrated by the centuries, almost a religious act, in which from imperfect materials you obtain the essence.” (58)

On the one hand, this is an anthropologically astute allusion to the tradition of kashrut Levi knew from childhood; purity, dietary and in other senses, is not a positive property of matter—as Mary Douglas writes, “there is no such thing as absolute dirt” (2)—but a state produced by ritual, and specifically, by exclusion. The chemist knows that benzene is pure because he has followed a *practice*, vaporizing the chemical to isolate solids, just as the observant Jew knows that meat is kosher because a recognized *shochet* has drained the animal’s blood.² But, historically situated as it is, Levi’s ablutionary chemistry evokes another kind of cleansing, one no less significant to a European Jew. “Almost every militant chemist,” Levi notes with baleful suggestiveness, “can confirm it: that one must distrust the almost-the-same, the practically identical, the approximate” (60).

This kind of parallel, between anti-Semitism and the more exclusionary kinds of Jewish observance, also has its place in Richler. Rachel Feldhay Brenner has noted the novelist's anxiety about "a growing similarity between the Jew and the tyrant" in the post-Holocaust world, an ethnically derived moral insularity which perpetuates antagonism (85). Brenner's study, *Assimilation and Assertion*, dates to 1989 and is consequently silent on *Gursky*, but her observation is in any event most strongly relevant to earlier characters—Mr. Cohen in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* or Harry Stein in *St. Urbain's Horseman*. In keeping with the present discussion about appetite, I would add that particularly in these earlier novels, the losses of caste which come from desire tend to be a good thing. Nancy Hersh, Jake's wife in *Horseman*, is the clearest instance of the Richlerian gentile sex heroine as cultural liberatrix; Yvette Durelle is the negative or tragic version of that type, which even in *Gursky* makes its appearance as Diana McClure, Solomon's great Westmount romance. In this light, dietary malpractice could be Richler's own version of what Kwame Appiah would later call "the case for contamination," with Henry, the puritanical Hassid, a Kronos eaten by his children rather than eating them.

This was exactly Levi's position. In a passage slightly blunter than that above, he writes of "Two conflicting philosophical conclusions: the praise of purity, which protects from evil like a coat of mail; the praise of impurity, which gives rise to changes, in other words to life. I discarded the first, disgustingly moralistic" (34). But no sense of benignant cosmopolitanism will excuse Isaac, from whose patriphagia everyone recoils, even the narrative itself—reproducing it only in a clipped sentence from a minor character. Nor will it excuse the Gurskys in aggregate. The rebbes may be terribly silly, but there is nevertheless something deeply discomfiting in Isaac's inability to stop, his proneness to need. Signally, his attempt to invoke the law of kashrut is an utter failure; as in the benzene ceremony, the contaminant has been excluded, the trayf travelling companion spurned. And yet Isaac remains unclean.

If there is a Richler who hates prigs, prudes, and hypocrites, there is also a Richler zealously committed to decrying sin. Admittedly, these are positions one can take together in a rhetorical breath, particularly when one casts oneself in antithesis to fallacious ethnic boosterism. In *Mordecai and Me*, Joel Yanofsky recalls a lecture at Montreal's Jewish Public Library in 1979, in which a bellicose Richler told his audience that too many in the Jewish community "find themselves absolutely adorable," and "confuse their

writers with publicists” (qtd. 213). Here, the deflation of neighbourhood piety coincided perfectly with the writer’s own higher moral purpose. But one still wants to ask: is Richler more disturbed by the faults he finds with his audience or by the unwillingness of that audience to admit them? Are Montreal Jews pretending to be something they should not, or failing to be what they should? This tension in Richler’s work, between rules which cannot be kept and people who are not good enough, is never really resolved, insofar as *resolution* would imply solubility, satisfaction, happy ending. It is first *synthesized*, first articulated as a fully self-conscious problem, however, in *Gursky*. The point of Isaac’s crime is not, as it seems to have been with Mr. Cohen in *Duddy*, that Mosaic or eugenic exclusion is unnecessary and cruel. It is that such exclusions, regardless of their desirability, do not work. Whatever happens, hunger will be at the root of it, and those who succeed will be, and always have been, the tricksters who play to hunger.

The principle can, no doubt, be immensely gratifying. The legal spanner in the Gursky works is Bert Smith, a Saskatchewan customs agent who will not take a bribe or a drink. Bernard takes him to lunch, offering to pay for Smith’s coffee and blueberry pie, but is rebuffed, and Solomon’s legal scapegoating begins (367). But Smith, a bitter, pungently written little racist, does not succeed in abstention. Decades after the trial, he unwittingly accepts Gursky money. His first purchase, “a coffee and blueberry muffin,” sees him symbolically reabsorb the contaminated offering (442). Less symbolically, Smith’s desire for a “British Canada” is the anti-Semitic side of Levi’s exclusionary coin, and we are glad to see him disappointed on both fronts.

But as counterweight to this apparent liberative potential in transgressive eating, there is the case of L.B. Berger. L.B.—like Bernard Gursky, a pointed character attack, this time on the poet A.M. Klein—is Moses Berger’s father, a pompous but unfulfilled literary figure in Montreal’s Jewish community. Ditching his freethinking Yiddish tea circle, L.B. offers himself to people who can better satiate his ego, the genteel gentiles of McGill University: “Catty, clever people, L.B. thought. Writers who luxuriated on private incomes and knew the best years for claret” (20). At length, the poet makes his needy way into the pocket of no less a person than Bernard Gursky, hired to write drecky speeches for fundraisers. The imagery of this transition is all that of food: at the pivotal moment in the poet’s apostasy, we learn that he “now eschewed chopped liver on rye with lemon tea and, instead, nibbled Camembert and sipped Tio Pepe” (20).

Again, this is not to say that L.B. would have been better, or better off, had he stuck to the food of the shtetl. Working for Bernard Gursky, a fellow Jew, is infinitely more distasteful than palling around in Canadian Bloomsbury (it is for the connection to Gursky that Moses repudiates his father as “someone who has eaten the king’s salt” [29]). The similarity is one of motive: in either direction, L.B. has been led by his belly. Prohibition does not work, but enticement does.

The whole Gursky fortune is derived from this principle—“prohibition” operating in its most obvious, historically specific sense. In 1861, Ephraim is already manufacturing an “unquenchable Blackfoot thirst” for his homemade rotgut and using it to acquire stolen horses (144). But the most completely sketched of Gursky pawns is Moses. As a graduate student, Moses turns down a job offered him by Bernard, but if he does better than his father, it is only in being snared by a more significant hunter. Early in the novel, Moses begins his morning with “a shot of Greysac Cognac, now yet another Gursky brand name,” and then begins ruminating on Solomon (10). Through his father’s acquaintance with the family, Moses becomes obsessed with the elder Gursky’s disappearance. Studying in England, he finds himself taken up by a mysterious, wealthy English Jew named Sir Hyman Kaplansky, who whispers to Moses several indefinite but highly suggestive parables about disguise and manipulation before himself disappearing in, of course, another flying accident. Moses continues to receive clues, anonymously or covertly, which drive him to track down and document the adventures of Solomon’s numerous afterlives, a glorious collection of revenges against notable anti-Semites and personal foes and interventions in the most definitive moments in global affairs.

Moses’ pursuit of evidence, his unwitting discharge of Solomon’s ghostly bidding, always coincides with his alcoholism. Kaplansky’s first teasing insight into his secret identity is concluded with an offer: “what would you say to a sherry?” (191). Later, Morrie Gursky, who is implicitly sympathetic to his oldest brother, coyly helps Moses to some necessary information, as well as to the contents of his liquor cabinet.

“What are you up to, Moses?”

Moses reached for the bottle.

“Don’t worry. It doesn’t stain. Just pour yourself another.” (213)

Morrie has already dissembled a concern for Moses’ apparent drinking problem. He actually begins the interview by offering “something to drink maybe?” Moses asks for coffee instead, and Morrie expresses relief. “You’re

not living up to your reputation. But I'm relieved to see that." Yet, as he tells his story, he invites Moses to "pour himself another" several times (209). Decades later, Moses is helped to discover Solomon in footage taken from press coverage of Watergate. Solomon leaves Moses a note, sportingly assuring him that "For the record, I didn't erase the tape" (313). At this point Moses is taking Antabuse to prevent drinking. Yet his reaction to the message is immediate: "When the waiter approached his table, Moses ordered a Macallan. A double. Neat" (313).³

And Moses, through all of this, is the scholar, the detective, the Servant of Truth. In *Tono-Bungay*, truth was the *alternative* to greed. George's scientific pursuits drew him away from monetary influence, rather than towards it, the austere products of his engineering standing aloof of his uncle's avarice. In *Gursky* there is no such separation. Curiosity is an appetite, like everything else, and like other appetites, it demands satisfaction. In the early scene, as he drinks his Greysac, Moses imagines that he

... might never have become enthralled with Solomon. The legendary Solomon. His bane, his spur. Instead he might have enjoyed a life of his own. A wife. Children. An honourable career. No, the booze would have got to him in any event. (11)

Feeding also features in Solomon's private revenges. In a luridly memorable scene, Sir Hyman Kaplansky hosts a seder for "friends" he has acquired in English high society, in fact a cherry-picking of aristocratic Nazi-appeasers and Judeophobes, one of whom makes the hilarious disclaimer that "Although I loathe anti-Semites, I do dislike Jews" (503). Kaplansky seats his guests before a "gleaming mound of beluga caviar" and "moist smoked salmon" but repeatedly delays letting them eat (507). He reads from T.S. Eliot's "Gerontion" with mock sympathy. Finally, as complaints of famishment become insistent, Kaplansky introduces the first course: matzoh, the bread of affliction. Disarmed by their ravenousness, guests discover only too late that Kaplansky's matzoh leaks blood when bitten into, and react with satisfying hysteria. This is only a few years after the Holocaust. Solomon's trap, baited with ostentatious offerings of food, springs a kind of inverted blood libel on the persecutors of his people.

It is when these gustative overtures feature in the rivalries *within* the Gursky family that they take on their most expansively historical significance. Bernard, the wolf of Ephraim's Aesopian illustration in the Arctic, is always eating, "nibbling cashews or sucking on a popsicle" (226). When a teenage Solomon, showing off by leaping into a pen of frightened horses, urges his brother to follow him with the promise "I'll buy you a beer,"

he is putting his grandfather's warning about Bernard directly into operation (352). The occasion out of which Ephraim, years earlier in the Arctic, made his lesson to Solomon was the setting of a trap. Applying honey to a knife mounted in the snow, Ephraim tells his grandson, "The wolf will come down later, start to lick the honey and slice his tongue to ribbons. Then the greedy fool will lick the blood off the blade until he bleeds to death" (38). And if Bernard is the wolf, Ephraim is teaching Solomon to be another animal. Ephraim is often seen with a raven. His name among the Netsilik, Tulugak, is the Inuktitut word for raven. Several of the alter egos Solomon uses after his disappearance play on the animal's name: Mr. Cuervo, Monsier Corbeau, Dr. Otto Raven, or Corvus Trust, the shadowy capital group which ultimately wrests control of McTavish from Bernard's son Lionel. The raven, inveterate trickster, always plays upon the appetites of others. In his house in England, Kaplansky finds Moses examining a piece of Inuit art. "Ah," Sir Hyman said, entering the library, "I see that you've been seduced by the deceitful raven" (191). He then relates a legend in which the raven lures a band of humans under an overhang and directs an avalanche onto their heads (191). And then, raven himself, he offers Moses a sherry.

It is this part of the novel, Ephraim and Solomon as the fusing of the indigenous Canadian raven/trickster figure with the Wandering Jew, which earns *Solomon Gursky Was Here* its frequent designation as magic realism.⁴ For my purpose, the important thing about these mythic borrowings is that they locate greed and transgression at a point of absolute origin, making them constitutive of history rather than mere periodic breaks, deviations, or the private mistakes of particular characters. In Kaplansky's story, the raven creates the world.

. . . he was dissatisfied as, at the time, the whole world was still dark. Inky black. The reason for this was an old man living in a house by the river. The old man had a box which contained a box which contained an infinite number of boxes, each nestled in a box slightly larger than itself until finally there was a box so small all it could contain was all the light in the universe. The raven was understandably resentful. Because of the darkness in the earth he kept bumping into things. He was slowed down in his pursuit of food and other fleshly pleasures and in his constant and notorious need to meddle and change things. And so, inevitably, he took it upon himself to steal the light of the universe from the old man. (494)

Through Ephraim in particular, the imperatives of manipulation and transgression embodied in the raven become inseparably bound up in Canadian history. From Victorian London, Ephraim panders his way into another founding myth, the Franklin Expedition. He is more or less the only

survivor, the rest of Franklin's men dying of lead poisoning from tinned food or of hypervitaminosis from eating the liver of a polar bear.⁵ Again, via the defeated spectre of Bert Smith's British Canada, the theme of contamination is raised, and we have the option of reading *Gursky* as a story of Canadian admixture, of a nation fortuitously impure. But to any such celebratory account we have to add the fact that Ephraim, the one crew member who is able to participate in the history which follows this seminal tragedy, survives only by allowing his shipmates to gorge themselves on poison, and by feeding himself from hidden stores, smuggled aboard the H.M.S. Erebus in secret.

Ephraim's story reiterates these themes of hunger and manipulation with every step he takes across the Canadian historical landscape. First, he persuades a Netsilik community to feed him and satisfy his sexual wants by converting them to an ad hoc version of Judaism, with himself as prophet and high priest. Later, he appears in Magog, Quebec, soliciting the religious dedication of the desperate Anglophone settlers of the Eastern Townships. The credulity of the villagers is directly ascribed to their physical hunger, the necessity of "eating cowslips and nettles, pig-weed, ground-nuts, and wild onions" (180). "Whatever them Millenarians is," one farmer comments after a lascivious look at one of Ephraim's female followers, "it's sure as shit a lot more fun than what we got" (7). Later still, incognito as the Reverend Ishmael Horn, Ephraim lures destitute European settlers to Canada with the promise of "milk and honey" and, less figuratively, "hot soup and freshly baked bread" in a scam for his own pecuniary gain, aided visually by a pet raven (83-84). Bert Smith's parents, fittingly enough, number among Ephraim's dupes.

In her benchmark study *Purity and Danger*, the anthropologist Mary Douglas proposes that the symbolic and ritual safeguards a culture erects against pollution are essential to its ethical stability.

The ideal order of society is guarded by dangers which threaten transgressors. These danger-beliefs are as much threats which one man uses to coerce another as dangers which he himself fears to incur by his own lapses from righteousness. They are a strong language of mutual exhortation. At this level the laws of nature are dragged in to sanction the moral code. . . . The whole universe is harnessed to men's attempts to force one another into good citizenship. Thus we find that certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in a dangerous contagion. (3)

There are, however, "social structures which rest on grave paradox or contradiction" (145-46). For instance, among the Mae Enga of New Guinea:

The men of the clan choose their wives from other clans. Thus they marry foreigners. The rule of clan exogamy is common enough. Whether it imports strain and difficulty into the marriage situation depends on how exclusive, localized and rivalrous are the intermarrying clans. In the Enga case they are not only foreigners but traditional enemies. (146-47)

This practice of importing wives from as far away as is practically feasible is the result of a series of prohibitions, designed to protect male purity from an anatomically construed “vulnerability to female influence” (147). But it is in constant conflict with another, more personal imperative towards “an intense competition for prestige,” with the members of different clans making exogamous marriage difficult to negotiate (147). This situation of untenable strain between cultural order and desire is a limited version of what *Gursky* alleges about Canada. For pure-wool Anglocentrists, he includes Jews on the Franklin Expedition, just as for Canadian Jews, he recounts cannibalism among the faithful.⁶ Even a more ethnically neutral sense of Canadian self, as polite, or even-tempered, or not greedy, becomes unavailable. None of the processes of societal definition seem to hold up.

Douglas thought of these crises in social regulation as relatively exceptional, probably because they were so destabilizing: “The left hand is fighting the right hand, as in the trickster myth” (157). *Gursky*, in which the trickster myth seems to be the general pattern of history, is closer to the ideas of more contemporary anthropologists like Elizabeth Povinelli, whose work questions past emphasis on the stability of cultural systems—albeit with a greater sense of ethical trauma at these changes, which despite their apparent inevitability, do remain legible as transgression. The loss of self experienced by the crew of the *Erebus* is both literal and excruciating. We last see their de facto leader, Lieutenant William Norton, “sobbing as strips of skin peeled off his legs” (436).

Adam Gopnik, in a commemorative notice of Richler’s death for *The New Yorker* in 2001, has it that:

. . . he was often grouped with the great generation of American Jewish writers, as a slightly lesser, northern version of Roth and Bellow and Malamud. But he really had nothing in common with those avid, world-devouring writers. If he belonged anywhere, it was to the train of acerbic English comic novelists whom he knew and admired during his long séjour in London. Evelyn Waugh was perhaps first among his idols, and Kingsley Amis’ “Lucky Jim” a sort of model. (30)

Sanctioned by an organ which could easily have taken a more possessive stance on Richler, I feel justified in comparing *Solomon Gursky Was Here* to one more English novel, this one by another, younger Amis. In *Money*, which

Martin Amis published in 1984, just five years before *Gursky*, a narrator named John Self is literally stung into a monologue on the state of consumption:

The wasp was dead. That sting was its last shot. Flies get dizzy spells and bees have booze problems. Robin redbreasts hit the deck with psychosomatic ulcers and cholesterol overload. In the alleys, dogs are coughing their hearts out on snout and dope. (246)⁷

Overconsumption, in other words, isn't just cultural. If the cities through which Self binges are an unmistakably Reagan-era New York and a specifically Thatcherite London, *Money's* versions of greed and indulgence nevertheless attach themselves to a fundamental nature. Like Richler's book, *Money* is all about susceptibility and manipulation. Self, a prospective film director and peculiarly nasty version of the modern consumer-as-bacchanalian, makes his way by appealing to everyone's more acquisitive instincts: investors, screenwriters, prostitutes, actors who are little different from prostitutes. And it is his own cravings which do Self in; the producer he thinks is footing his gargantuan liquor and sex bills has been robbing him from the start.

In the relationship between Amis' and Richler's books, we could begin to sketch a literary response to the political and economic climate of the 1980s, a carrying-over of the naturalization of greed and consumption in those discourses, with the proviso that in these two works, at least, that naturalization has largely negative implications. But the comparison with *Money* will in other ways throw *Gursky* into relief. In Amis' novel, the inevitability of the impulse does not quite imply that we inevitably act on it. After Self loses his fortune, he finds an unprecedented kind of peace: "I want money again but I feel better now that I haven't got any" (361). Some characters can even resist money when they have it, in a way which seems to have to do with class. In London, Self consults a writer with the unambiguous name of "Martin Amis," whose haughtily stoic appearance in the book perfectly predicts the controversial role of high-culture jeremiah that the real-life Amis has taken on since its writing.⁸ "This Martin Amis, he lives like a student," Self tells us (220). When Self presses him on his monastic habits, Amis says, "I really don't want to join it, the whole money conspiracy" (243).

Appetite, then, becomes a kind of incontinence, something one shouldn't put oneself in the position of being able to gratify. This allows for a straightforwardly ethical stance: the fact of desire may be inevitable, but *giving in* too much to it is condemnable and disgusting. Amis, in perfect

contrast with Wells, is making an argument *for* culture, with overdraft limits and the public school aitch standing in for the injunctions against gender contact that Douglas describes in New Guinea. *Money* could itself be read as this kind of injunction: “The distance between author and narrator corresponds to the degree to which the author finds the narrator wicked, deluded, pitiful, or ridiculous,” Amis tells Self in a confrontationally metafictional passage: “This creates an appetite for punishment” (229).

But in *Gursky*, there is no question of a “return” to past standards. However much this may confirm a normally pleasing Richlerian register—and certainly, there is much that is pleasing in Ephraim and Solomon, unflappable, irresistible characters, characters who are unhypocritical about what they want and who will play mercilessly with anyone less candid—it is nevertheless crucial to this novel that it is morally disturbed, and that its vision of history, including Canadian history, is a perpetuation of moral disturbance. In *Gursky*’s final scene, as Moses Berger watches a raven disappearing into the sun, he realizes how completely he has been baited: “It finally struck him that he wasn’t the angler but the salmon. A teasing, gleeful Solomon casting the flies over his head” (550). The ambivalence of Moses’ position is the ambivalence of the novel; impressively, even hilariously, we have been duped and led to war against our own rules from the beginning.

NOTES

- 1 Ponderevo’s inept French is supposed to add to the ridiculousness of his proposal. “Stern” and “Smoor” should be the wine regions Sauternes and Saumur. “Oh fay” indicates “Au fait.” See Wells 406n.
- 2 This logic of separation sometimes recurs in explanations of kashrut at the systemic level. Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, glossing the thirteenth-century Spanish rabbi Bahya ben Asher, suggests that “One of the main reasons God commanded the dietary laws was to distinguish the Jews, God’s chosen people, from all the other nations of the world” (119).
- 3 Sander Gilman observes how Antabuse is itself, like recent innovations in stomach-stapling surgery, a very literal ritual of exclusion: “Such procedures sound much like those of Disulfiram (Antabuse), a drug prescribed to alcoholics that makes them nauseous and likely to vomit when they drink. The fat boy whose stomach has been reduced in size suffers an intense bout of nausea” (232). If, in Gilman’s description, these excisions bear a disturbing hint of Foucaultian discipline, their failure in Moses’ case is less than a relief.
- 4 See, for instance, Richard Todd’s chapter in the 1995 collection *Magical Realism: Theory, History, and Community*.
- 5 Besides lead and vitamin A poisoning, we could say something of cannibalism. John Rae, the Scottish doctor and explorer who conducted the first extensive search for Franklin, returned to Admiralty authorities with distressing (if perhaps unsurprising) accounts from the Inuit of how the sailors had devoured their dead. The report met with considerable

- indignation, with the most authoritative rebuttal coming from Charles Dickens in his journal *Household Words* (361). The arctic location of this scandal and the moralistic backlash against it, make for an almost typological antecedence to Isaac's crimes.
- 6 A more extensive and focused application of Douglas' anthropological lens to Kashrut law can be found in Howard Eilberg-Schwartz's *The Savage in Judaism*.
 - 7 To a considerable extent, John Self is a reprise of Roger Micheldene, the titular protagonist of Amis Sr.'s 1963 novel *One Fat Englishman*. I choose the later character here out of a desire to synthesize an attitude towards greed and gluttony particular to the moment of the 1980s.
 - 8 Recent examples are Amis' comments on the British celebrity author Katie Price in Stephen Adams' article "Jordan is just 'two bags of silicone' says Martin Amis."

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