

# Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Saviour

## Richler's Picaro Messiahs<sup>1</sup>

Following his death, the work of Mordecai Richler can be treated as a complete, unified project and approached in new ways. A far-reaching backward gaze can now highlight Richler's Jewishness and place him in the long line of writers who drew their inspiration from religion. It is my conviction that the intellectual structure underlying what I consider to be Richler's two most accomplished novels—*St. Urbain's Horseman* (1971) and *Solomon Gursky Was Here* (1989)—is an ironic rendition of the messianic myth, itself a persistent motif in Jewish writing worldwide.

Mordecai Richler came from a family with a deeply ingrained religious sensibility. His maternal grandfather, Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg, originally from the Polish *shtetl* of Skaryszew, was known as “der Polisher rebbe” throughout Montreal, while his grandfather on the other side, Shmarya Richler, was exceedingly pious and knowledgeable about the Torah (Kramer 12-14). However, it may not be immediately apparent to a reader of Richler's work that the writer inherited a reverence for the tradition. On the contrary, traditional Judaism and its institutions were among the many things he was infamous for criticizing both in his fiction and his journalism. Furthermore, his personal life seemed to confirm this attitude. As a teenager, Richler wilfully rejected even the most rudimentary religious customs, such as observing the Sabbath. The writer would often connect his apostasy with his bitter disappointment in his ultra-orthodox grandfather, Shmarya, whom young Mordecai quickly came to see as a fraud (Posner 7, 16). Moreover, the writer married outside his faith twice and raised his children in an atmosphere that was virtually free of religious persuasion (“I'm okay, you're okay; no hangups, but no magic, either;

too bad,” Richler, *Broadsides* 13). The most ironic story of his estrangement from his native religion is perhaps the event that he relates, clearly ashamed, in his part-memoir, part-reportage, *This Year in Jerusalem* (1994). Having praised the Jewish cuisine to an American friend in Paris, Richler suggested that they visit a kosher restaurant. Finding the place empty, the two read a note on the door informing them that the restaurant was closed on account of Yom Kippur:

A sign in the window, which I took to be a personal rebuke—surely set in place by my paternal grandfather’s ghost, a *dybbuk* in quest of winter quarters—expressed the wish that all of the restaurant’s clientele would be written down for a good year in the Book of Life: *L’shana tova tikatevu*. (Richler, *This Year* 74)

The situation is doubly ironic, because *Yom Kippur* (The Day of Atonement) is perhaps the most important day in the Jewish calendar, a day on which many Jews attend the synagogue; also, the holiday entails a twenty-four-hour fast (Kameraz-Kos 47-53). Scouting for clues referring to Richler’s relationship with his troublesome past, one ought not to miss the grandpaternal *dybbuk*’s “personal rebuke”: a light-hearted joke with a sour, shadowy core.

I do not intend to suggest that Richler was, contrary to appearances, a religious man. Nevertheless—although one will find a number of glib, long-winded rabbis in his fiction—traditional Judaism, represented by the generation of his grandfathers, is frequently absolved of the all-embracing scorn that Richler could so easily muster. For instance, his breakthrough 1959 novel, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, features two mirroring episodes concerning this generation: Bernie Cohen’s *bar mitzvah* ceremony and the surveying of the land by the Kravitz family. In both, the *Zeyda* (Yiddish for grandfather) is seriously disappointed with the behavior of his sons and grandsons, and exits the scene in gloom, possibly even tears, to wait it out in the car. The eldest Cohen does so because he insists that the new synagogue looks like a church and the entire *bar mitzvah* celebration in its new guise, complete with the film recording arranged by Duddy, feels alien to him. The eldest Kravitz, in turn, protests because he has just received information about the questionable ways in which Duddy acquired his land. Richler’s sense of farce is conspicuously absent from these fragments. They present not melodramatic, exaggerated exits, but rather quiet resolutions not to participate, which manage to evoke genuine sadness—a rare occurrence in Richler’s fiction.

In his unorthodox memoir, *Mordecai & Me: An Appreciation of a Kind*, Joel Yanofsky describes Richler as an “ambivalent Jew” (138) and suggests

that what the writer inherited from the Jewish tradition was a certain sternness and an inclination to moral outrage: “Richler may have turned his back on religion, but he was still the grandson of a rabbi, after all. If he was no longer orthodox in observance, he remained orthodox in temperament” (156). His long-time friend, the director Ted Kotcheff, stated that Richler was endowed with “an almost rabbinical sense of behaviour, of morality in the sense of commitments” (Posner 181). It is not a coincidence that in Richler’s sophomore novel, *Son of a Smaller Hero*, an angry relative tells the young, rebellious Noah Adler that he resembles the patriarch of the family, the stern, uncompromising *Zeyda* Melech, the very person against whose authority Noah imagines himself rebelling (84, 186).

Richler tirelessly described himself as an “unfrocked priest,” claiming that writing was a “moral office,” and insisting on the ethical ramifications of serious literature. “I write out of a kind of disgust with things as they are,” he maintained (Richler with Gibson 298). Various appellations that the writer acquired over the years speak for themselves: Donald Cameron suggested in the title of his interview that he was conversing with a “Reticent Moralist” (Richler with Cameron 114), Margaret Atwood eulogized the writer as “the Diogenes of Montréal” (192), while Michael Posner titled his oral biography of Richler *The Last Honest Man*.

However, this deeply rooted sense of morality only accounts for one part of Richler the writer; the other—if we insist on a dichotomy—would be constituted by what Kerry McSweeney calls the “deconstructive energy” or “the dark, negating energy of Richler’s imagination” (12, 39), a fascination with mischief and disorder. His interest in the marginal and, to use Linda Hutcheon’s famous formulation, the “ex-centric” (3) manifested itself through a Bellovian relish in characters who were disruptive in one way or another (Blacher Cohen 21-24). Richler repeatedly admitted that his fancy was captivated by con men, people with huge appetites for life, who used their wits, often with a disregard for the law, to survive and prosper: the “inspired ruffians” (Richler, *Broadsides* 180; *Belling* 21) and the “hooligans of great appetite” (Richler with Bigsby 130). “Possibly” he once stated, “I celebrate certain aspects of human behaviour that other people would prefer not to know about” (Richler with Daniel Richler 19).

The literary term that captures the essence of these clever, unruly figures—best exemplified by Duddy Kravitz (Greenstein 146), Atuk, or Ephraim Gursky—is the picaro. The picaro, as defined by Ulrich Wicks, is a “protean figure” invested with “inconstancy—of life roles, of self-identity,” which

often implies an absence of ethical principles, or essential personality traits (“Nature of Picaresque” 243-47).<sup>2</sup> However, with the exception of the cartoonish, incurably self-centered Atuk, Richler’s picaresque figures seem, despite their somewhat villainous natures, to be concerned about others. Beginning with Duddy, who is driven by a combination of money-lust and a desire to vindicate the pride of his family, and whose concern for his blood relations is a redeeming quality to be reckoned with (cf. Wainwright), and finishing with Solomon Gursky, the arch-manipulator, “buying kikes,” i.e. bribing the deputy minister for immigration to allow European Jews into Canada, Richler’s picaros repeatedly demonstrate that more than their personal survival and victory is at stake (Richler, *Gursky* 343).

Perhaps it is the convergence of these two streams of Richler’s writing that accounts for the brilliance of novels such as *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, where the author’s own enthrallment with and repulsion from the protagonist are mirrored in the readers’ responses. The same mixture is responsible for what some critics and readers perceive as a disturbingly (or else refreshingly) double vision, the all-embracing Richlerian “ambivalence” (Ramraj 1). I would argue, however, that Richler was at his best when he attempted the seemingly impossible, namely a fusing of a sense of moral outrage and the picaro qualities within one and the same character (in contrast to *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, where the moral emphasis is placed outside the protagonist). He attempted this fusion twice, in a pair of long, ambitious novels with large casts and complex plots, separated by a span of almost twenty years: *St. Urbain’s Horseman* and *Solomon Gursky Was Here*. Both novels are, among other things, chronicles of one man’s obsession with another. In this sense, they may be said to belong to the genre of the elegiac romance, as defined by Kenneth Bruffee in a book of the same title (50-51). The obsession in question is already evident in the titles: rather than concentrate on the character who is the central consciousness of the given novel (Jake Hersh and Moses Berger, respectively) the titles focus on the object of the fixation, the haunting presence, i.e. Cousin Joey (the eponymous Horseman) and Solomon Gursky.

Jake Hersh, the protagonist of *St. Urbain’s Horseman*, is a middle-aged expatriate Canadian living in London with his non-Jewish wife and several children. He is a moderately successful film director who begins to sense that whatever praise he has won—sparse as it has been—was undeserved, and, as the years go by, he is less and less likely to create the masterpiece of which he has always believed himself capable. Furthermore, he is bursting with a

sense of injustice and anger, instilled in him by the excruciating history of his people. His *idée fixe*, which amalgamates these violent emotions, is his Cousin Joey, whom Jake believes to be a Nazi hunter, but whom the rest of the family considers a fraud and a bandit. As per Bruffee's definition of the elegiac romance (50), the work is contrapuntal: while the novel's past largely concerns Cousin Joey, its present involves a trial that Jake faces as a result of his alliance with the highly unpleasant, misanthropic Harry Stein. The trial has Kafkaesque reverberations and becomes the metaphor of the moral accounting which Jake has long awaited and feared (cf. Pollock).

Moses Berger, the protagonist of *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, is also middle-aged, a failed scholar and an alcoholic, living alone in the Eastern Townships. His life's work and mania is the unfinished—perhaps utterly impossible—biography of Solomon Gursky, the foremost member of a family who made their fortune in the liquor trade during Prohibition. Like Jake, Moses is filled with outrage at the fate of the Jews, and his temporary solution is also similar. Obsessed with Solomon Gursky, he intends to salvage his hero's name from the grime which has attached itself to the family's success story.<sup>3</sup> Again, a temporal counterpoint is at work: the novel's present, which, as Barbara Korte notices, lasts a mere few hours (503), concentrates on Moses's search for a salmon fly; this second quest of the avid Gurskyologist-cum-angler appears to be a diminutive, parodic version of the larger one, especially given the phonetic association between the words salmon and Solomon.

The Horseman and Solomon Gursky are both missing and presumed dead during the narrative present. The reader's task—to accumulate the scattered shards of information about Joey and Solomon, and construct some semblance of a whole—runs parallel to the protagonists' respective quests. Indeed, Jake and Moses are inveterate questers, who have dedicated a considerable part of their lives to reconstructing the image of the elusive figure; while Jake's life, both public and private, is seriously hindered by his obsession, Moses's existence is practically paralyzed by his. In their quests, they follow a conspicuous agenda, searching for proof that, various malevolent rumors notwithstanding, Cousin Joey and Solomon Gursky were or are people of high moral standing and, indeed, establishing that they should be seen as beacons to others, the Jews in particular, rather than mere frauds, criminals, and parasites.

In both cases, this proves a difficult task. Faced with mounting evidence to the contrary, but reluctant to surrender their fantasies, Jake and Moses elevate the objects of their fascination to mythic status. While *Solomon Gursky*

*Was Here*, partly set in the Northwest Territories, also resonates with Inuit trickster tales, the central myths to which the protagonists refer are Jewish. Some are evoked explicitly, such as the Golem and the *Lamed vovniks* (the Thirty-Six Hidden Just Men) in *St. Urbain's Horseman* (cf. Cude). However, I am convinced that the central myth informing both novels, never actually verbalized in the context of the eponymous characters and rarely employed as a critical focal lens (excepting G. David Sheps' insightful study of *St. Urbain's Horseman*), is the myth of the Jewish Messiah.

It is almost a commonplace that the dissimilar perception of the Messiah constitutes the fundamental difference and matter of contention between Judaism and Christianity (Scholem 1). Julius Greenstone sees the messianic idea as "characteristically Jewish," perceiving the distinctive feature of the Jewish outlook in an orientation towards the future, "the end of days," rather than towards a mythical golden age situated in the past (21-23). The Hebrew word *moschiah* means "the anointed (one)": in its broadest sense, the term was originally applied to kings, patriarchs, prophets, and priests, i.e. those anointed with olive oil while assuming their duties, to mark the special favour bestowed on them by God (Dupkala 12; Lenowitz 9-14). David Berger provides the following pithy description of the messianic idea: "a king will arise from the line of the biblical David who will preside over a peaceful, prosperous, monotheistic world, with the Temple in Jerusalem rebuilt and the Jewish people—including at some point its resurrected dead—returned to its land" (23). However, as Norman Cohn observes, the concept underwent huge transformations: whereas the earliest versions of the notion foresaw a powerful king who was uncommonly judicious and fair, as the situation worsened, the Messiah assumed increasingly prodigious qualities (22). While Christians see the fulfilment of Biblical prophecies (e.g. Genesis and Isaiah) in Jesus, Jews are still waiting for their Messiah. Naturally, this expectation of final justice, of the ultimate defeat of the enemies of Israel, continues to inform Jewish writing.

I can think of no better literary example to illustrate the importance of the concept than a scene from Isaac Bashevis Singer's early novel *Satan in Goray* (published in Yiddish in instalments in the early thirties). The action takes place in seventeenth-century Poland and focuses on the cult surrounding a messianic pretender, Shabtai Zvi, one of many so-called false messiahs (cf. Lenowitz 149-65). In Singer's novel, the Jews of Goray, a Polish *shtetl*, are so certain that the long-awaited "end of days" is approaching that they stop attending to everyday chores:

Shopkeepers no longer kept shop, artisans suspended their labors. It seemed useless to complete anything. Now the people ate only food that did not need preparation and was easy to obtain. Since they were too slothful to gather firewood in the forest, they acquired the habit of heating their ovens with the lumber they had available. By winter they would be settled in Jerusalem. And so they tore down fences and outhouses for kindling. Some even ripped the shingles from their roofs. (*Satan in Goray* 120)

The messianic future, it seems, has finally blended with the present and it will no longer be necessary to say “next year in Jerusalem” during the Passover *seder*.<sup>4</sup> The coming of the Messiah equals an end to injustice, an end to persecution and pogroms, an end to the Jewish plight, all of which lie at the heart of Jake Hersh’s and Moses Berger’s anger.

As already stated, in the novels under scrutiny the messianic myth constitutes a thematic undercurrent which rarely, if at all, surfaces on the level of actual narrative. Characteristically, when Richler invokes the myth explicitly, it is done for the purposes of comic effect. In *St. Urbain’s Horseman*, Cousin Joey’s father Baruch ridicules the entire Hersh family by saying that “they’ll bury themselves with twigs . . . so that when the Messiah comes they can dig their way to him” (170, 397).<sup>5</sup> In *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, Ephraim, the founder of the Gursky dynasty and con man extraordinaire, prophesizes “the Second Coming of Christ in the Eastern Townships about the year 1851” in his spiel advertising the spurious Church of the Millenarians, with a view to seizing the gold-filled land from the naïve populace (162). Converting the Inuit to a bogus version of Judaism, he promises them that a Messiah will be born as his issue: “The Messiah, a descendant of Ephraim’s, would return their ancestors to them and make the seal and caribou so plentiful that nobody would starve again” (403). Eager expectation of the Messiah is also ridiculed in the figure of Henry Gursky, the wise fool who is building the second Ark and who regularly buys *The Moshiach Times* for his son, Isaac, but who is ultimately devoured by him. These scattered references can be read as distractions which, in their playfulness, divert the reader from the underlying theme by parodying it. Analyzed closely, they reveal tantalizing ironies: the name of the Horseman’s father, Baruch, means “blessed” in Hebrew; Solomon is “a descendant of Ephraim’s”; so is Henry, who saves the Inuit from death by starvation, thus fulfilling his grandfather’s fraudulent prophecy almost verbatim.<sup>6</sup>

If the two protagonists, Jake Hersh and Moses Berger, appear to be self-pitying rather than tragic figures, they possess something akin to the tragic flaw: namely, even after the disappointments of their idealistic youth, they

still “expect justice to be done” (Richler, *Gursky* 149). The passive voice—“to be done”—is crucial. Sheps observes that Jake Hersh’s defining quality is the “vicariousness” of his existence (83); in many respects, Moses Berger inherits this trait. In both cases, the protagonist’s inability to act is counterbalanced by fantasizing about someone who undertakes heroic deeds, challenging the stereotype of Jewish passivity. Cousin Joey and Solomon Gursky can both be described as “defiantly Jewish,” their “hackles raised” constantly (Richler, *Gursky* 373, 363). In both cases, their actions and attitudes become an “exacting standard” that the protagonists apply to their own lives, which they constantly find wanting (Richler, *Horseman* 311).

With his recurrent, accusatory question “What are you going to do about it?” (Richler, *Horseman* 136, 257, 261, 464) the Cousin Joey whom Jake retrospectively imagines is not “the type to let sleeping dogs lie” (266). In his Montreal days, during a surge of anti-Semitic sentiments, he frightens a gang of French Canadians away from Fletcher’s Field, ensuring that Jewish boys can once again play there in safety. He also forms a posse that takes violent revenge for an assault on a Jewish boy at the Palais d’Or. As Yosef ben Baruch, he takes active part in the Israeli War of Independence, siding with the most extreme factions. He collects photographs of prominent Nazis, and may be seeking Josef Mengele in Paraguay. Jake’s recurrent dream in which Cousin Joey extracts gold fillings from Mengele’s teeth can be viewed as a symbolic reversal of violence and an image of messianic justice, especially since Jake’s waking words are “He’s come” (Richler, *Horseman* 3).

Jake’s partly involuntary quest—visibly modeled on A. M. Klein’s novel *The Second Scroll* (Kramer 227-228)—is decisive in constructing his awareness of recent Jewish history: in its course, the protagonist encounters a paranoid survivor of the camps, investigates the “restored Jewish pride” in Eretz Yisroel (Richler, *Horseman* 252), visits the Munich Bürgerbräukeller (the cradle of the Nazi movement) and attends the Frankfurt trials.

Solomon Gursky, as perceived by Moses Berger, is similarly characterized by bold gestures that can be interpreted in terms of messianic promise. After his 1933 stay in Germany, instead of attending to the burgeoning business, Solomon follows the disquieting news from Europe and deals with “unsavory, shifty-eyed little strangers, wearing funny European-style suits” (Richler, *Gursky* 343), clearly arranging illegal transfers of Jews from the Old World to the New. He pays numerous visits to the deputy minister of immigration in Ottawa, Horace MacIntyre, attempting to convince the latter to allow the “nonpreferred immigrants” into Canada (344; cf. Abella and



Troper). Gursky also indulges in a Zionist fantasy on Canadian ground, an echo of Duddy Kravitz's dream. Namely, he purchases two thousand acres of farmland in the Laurentians, together with herds of cattle. In addition, he assembles a list of Jews who have declared their readiness to settle in that area (Richler, *Gursky* 348-349). After his feigned death and, in the postwar period, under the name Hyman Kaplansky, Gursky focuses his efforts on the Holy Land, which has once again become the hub of Jewish history. In 1946, Kaplansky's freighters are "caught trying to run the Palestine blockade," and two years later the dismantling of his small air force, ostensibly assembled for the purposes of a film, oddly coincides with Ben-Gurion's proclamation of the Jewish state. It is also suggested that, as Mr. Cuervo (one of Gursky's numerous raven-inspired pseudonyms), he influences the outcome of the 1976 raid on Entebbe.

Nevertheless, to overplay the heroic aspect of these characters and neglect their picaresque qualities would lead to a reduction of the novel's complexity. Describing the choice of the raven as Solomon Gursky's emblem, Richler emphasized that the character is "both the creator and the destroyer" (Richler with Bigsby 131), a clear instance of the "ambivalence" identified by Ramraj. Neither of the two messianic figures ever sheds the cloak of ambiguity that shrouds him. The narration of their exploits is necessarily fragmented and episodic. Like Uncle Melech in *The Second Scroll*, they are invariably portrayed as protean, assuming new names and identities with perplexing ease. Moreover, both have considerable acting skills, which are undoubtedly convenient for such reinventions. Their picaresque nature is further reinforced by their obvious intelligence and their frequent conflicts with the law. Their numerous similarities, however, ought not perhaps to obscure certain significant differences: in contrast to the surly, violent Cousin Joey, Solomon is a charming and likeable trickster, possessed of an "unquenchable itch to meddle and provoke things" (Richler, *Gursky* 507), not least the wild goose chase on which he sends Moses Berger.

The Richlerian ambiguity, clearly anchored in the picaresque element of both novels and emanating from it, appears to infect the copious religious allusions. Thus, the reader may be led to believe that Jake and Moses are to be seen as latter-day prophets or apostles, playing Rabbi Akiba or Nathan of Gaza to their respective Simon bar Kochba or Shabtai Zvi, even as the novel's contrary pull appears to present them as sadly deluded and alienated from life's actual sources. Jesse Hope, one of Cousin Joey's pseudonyms, may be read as alluding to the messianic prophecy concerning the "rod

out of the stem of Jesse”;<sup>7</sup> however, it might simply be what it purports to be, a stylish name adopted for Joey’s persona as a country singer. When Moses is invited to an audience with Solomon (appearing at that moment as Hyman Kaplansky), the invitation is described as “the summons from Sinai” (Richler, *Gursky* 172) and the meeting culminates in an agreement that binds the two men, grandly suggesting a parallel with the covenant between God and the Biblical Moses;<sup>8</sup> yet it is just as easy to read in the formulation the customary Richlerian ridicule aimed at illusions of grandeur.

However, in *St. Urbain’s Horseman*, Richler provides the reader with a clue that may lead the reader out of this maze of religious or pseudo-religious signification. In the novel’s finale he has Jake Hersh, who is contemplating his obsession with Cousin Joey, ask himself: “Who am I? . . . I’m Aaron maybe” (Richler, *Horseman* 465). The Biblical Aaron is Moses’s brother who, pressed hard by the Israelites during the prophet’s lengthy sojourn on Mount Sinai, agrees to the creation of the Golden Calf, thus incurring God’s wrath (Exodus 32).<sup>9</sup> In an interview with John Metcalf, Richler himself suggested that the *Horseman* could be seen as a Golden Calf created out of despair (Richler with Metcalf 76), while one waits for the silent God to fulfill His side of the covenant.

If we extend this reasoning to *Solomon Gursky*—which seems legitimate given the many similarities between the two works—then we are able to read both texts as variations on a story of a would-be Moses who finally discovers his true identity as Aaron, a would-be prophet who fashions a Golden Calf. To that infamous idol, as the Book of Exodus informs us, the Israelites contributed their valuables—trinkets and jewelry.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Jake and Moses construct their image of the Messiah out of qualities which they respect (honour, dignity, courage) and perhaps some which they, like Richler himself, cannot help but admire (insolence and appetite). Wilfred Cude reminds us that Aaron, although chastised for the incident, was forgiven and went on to initiate the line of Jewish high priests (194-95). Similarly, Jake Hersh and Moses Berger can be pardoned for worshipping their own picaro messiahs, because ultimately what engenders these creations is a noble, moral impulse: a quixotic desire for justice and goodness.

#### NOTES

- 1 This article is a considerably altered and extended version of a paper entitled “We Want *Moschiah* Now’: A Religious Perspective on Two Novels by Mordecai Richler,” published in *Canadian Ghosts, Hopes and Values. Rémanences, espérances et valeurs canadiennes*,

- ed. Maciej Abramowicz and Joanna Durczak, Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2008.
- 2 According to the findings mentioned by Américo Castro in his book *Hacia Cervantes* (1960), the picaresque novel may have first arisen as an emanation of the Jewish convert's hatred of the society that refused to accept him despite the sacrifice of his faith. Castro quotes convincing evidence to the effect that both the anonymous author of *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) and Mateo Alemán, the author of *The Rogue, or the Life of Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599)—two early instances of *la novella picaresca*—were *conversos*, i.e. Jews who were pressured by the Spanish Inquisition to publicly renounce their faith and adopt Christianity. This would suggest that the prototypical picaro was Jewish, a suggestion that Richler would have relished (Wicks, "Picaresque" 977).
  - 3 Although Richler claimed that he had "made the Gurskys up out of [his] own head" (*Broadsides* 508), many readers saw the saga as a direct borrowing from the story of the Bronfman family. Asked directly during a question and answer period if the novel was about the Bronfmans, Richler replied indignantly: "I will not have seven years of my work reduced to gossip. Next question" (Yanofsky 218).
  - 4 The formula, *Bashana Habaa b'Yerushalaim*, uttered as the participants drink the fourth cup of wine, expresses the hope that they will all meet in Jerusalem during next year's Passover because the Messiah will have arrived in the meantime (Kameraz-Kos 55-63).
  - 5 Though mockingly, Baruch is alluding to an actual custom among *shtetl* Jews. I.B. Singer mentions the same detail in his stories, e.g. "The Destruction of Kreshev" and "Taibele and Her Demon" (Singer, *Collected Stories* 127, 139).
  - 6 The starvation motif in this case is Richler's jab at the celebrated quality of the Jewish *mitzvoth* ("commandments"), which, as a product of a diasporic people, are reputed to cover every contingency. The butt of Richler's joke here is precisely the custom that he himself forgot while in Paris: the Yom Kippur fast, which is supposed to be kept for a full twenty-four hours, from one sunset until the next (Kameraz-Kos 51). Obviously, come October and permanent night, followed after many months by constant daylight, the converted Inuit in *Solomon Gursky Was Here* find themselves facing a terrible dilemma.
  - 7 "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots" (Isaiah 11:1, King James Version). Jesse is the father of King David, descended from Adam, and thus the stem of Jesse symbolizes royal ancestry (Ross).
  - 8 Interestingly, the same Biblical phrase is used to describe an earlier Gursky-Berger agreement, i.e. the indenture of L.B. Berger, Moses's obsequious father, as speechwriter to Bernard Gursky, the treacherous brother to Solomon (Richler, *Gursky* 18).
  - 9 Incidentally, the occasion of God's forgiving the Israelites for their impatience and presumptuousness is celebrated as Yom Kippur (Kameraz-Kos 47).
  - 10 "And Aaron said unto them, Break off the golden earrings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them unto me. And all the people brake off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them unto Aaron" (Exodus 32:2-3).

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