THE APPRENTICESHIP OF NOAH ADLER

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WITH ITS CRITICAL AND POPULAR SUCCESS as both novel and film, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* has eclipsed Richler's only other novel that deals entirely with the Montreal ghetto — *Son of a Smaller Hero* — and while most critics agree on the superiority of the later work, it is unfortunate that Richler's second novel has been written off instead of written about. To the charge that the earlier work lacks the aesthetic distance of the more fully developed novel, one can appeal only to the impact of immediacy in *Son of a Smaller Hero*.[1] To the charge that Noah Adler's indecisiveness demonstrates a lack of control, one can counter merely with an Empsonian defence of ambiguity. Does Richler provide an unambiguous statement at the end of *Duddy Kravitz*? If the less mature work does lack the development of Richler's later period, it at least offers a tighter unity because of the absence of excursions to New York and Toronto.

Richler employs the same satiric devices in both novels from the simple slogan or one-line advertisement, a form of graffiti, to the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, the lofty ideal with the vulgar reality, the sublime with the ridiculous. Melech's secret box which contains sacred scrolls and the letters and photographs of Helga provides the central example of satiric juxtaposition, but there are other instances. For example, Richler contrasts the Prudential insurance salesmen selling security with the psychological insecurities of so many of the characters. He plays off against each other the neon lights of the Queen Mary Road Jews and the guiding light that recalls Jacob Goldenberg's death for Leah, his daughter: "the gathering yellow fog of exploding yellow lights." This "light" imagery also plays a role in Melech's relationship to his "lost" children, his grandson and Helga's child. He dreams of Noah: "He could have been the brightness of my old years," and recalls the blond brightness of Helga, the dancer, and her blond son. But the most celebrated instance of satiric juxtaposition in *Son of a Smaller Hero* is the funeral with its cinematic montage, each member of the family commenting vulgarly on the religious prayer for the dead.

However, like *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *Son of a Smaller Hero* is concerned with more serious matters than ethnic satire, namely, Noah Adler's initiation and self-discovery. Though older than Duddy, Noah shares the same premature aging that Duddy displays: "He was twenty years old, but his forehead was already wrinkled. His eyes, which were black, were sorrowful and deep and not without a feeling for comedy." These revealing eyes seem to be a common physiological and psychological trait among members of the Adler family. Noah has inherited his eyes from his grandfather whose "smouldering black eyes" stay solemn even when he laughs with his grandchildren. Melech's youngest son, Shloime, a year younger than his nephew Noah, has "two sullen, malicious eyes" half-concealed beneath drooping eyelids. During the course of the novel Noah must reject these members of the family whom he resembles physically, but not psychologically; yet he must go beyond mere rejection: to find himself he must see through them and replace their false values with his own definite values.

To follow Noah's process of self-discovery, one should consider the names of the Adler family, for, like the "eyes," they provide important clues and ironic commentary on the characters and their interrelationships. Adler is a Yiddish name for eagle, king of the predatory birds; the Adlers are predators to Noah who refers often to their cage from which he hopes to escape. Melech, king in Hebrew, "ruled all his own children by authority," identifying himself in the novel's final rhetorical question with King David: "Hadn't the Angel of Death passed over King David because he was at his prayers?" David's son was Solomon and *Shloime* means *Solomon*. Richler's ironic inversion is readily apparent: Solomon was known for his wisdom whereas Shloime goes against justice in the Panofsky robbery and commits arson when he sets fire to his father's office. The oldest son Wolf, another predator, wiggles his ears and spends most of his time in the den.

Indirectly Noah can be related to the Biblical Noah. At Wolf's funeral the self-righteous Uncle Itzik exclaims, "If there's another flood . . . Noah deserves to be dead," and if Richler does not provide the ark metaphor, Desmond Pacey does: "the ark Noah seeks out of the flood is integrity and freedom, and these, at the novel's end, he sets out to seek in Europe."[2] Richler does repeat the image of the drowning man in his boat during Noah's period of mourning for his father. "He held on to sleep the way a drowning man must cling to his share of driftwood. Each morning there was the feeling of his ship being pulled back into a whirlpool. Noah rowed madly with both oars. But the oars were broken." This *bateau ivre* reappears after his mother's heart attack: "The broken oars burst free of their locks. The boat itself broke up underneath him. And Noah, who did not call out for help, felt the waters close over him." Perhaps he has picked up the image from his mother's vision of the dark fog swirling beneath heavy seas.

After the flood the Biblical Noah is discovered in his drunken nakedness by one of his sons, but Richler inverts that story by allowing his inebriated Noah to uncover the truth about his father and his grandfather. As a witness to their psychological nakedness, he strips away the illusions surrounding his father's "heroic" act.[3]

The Adlers are related to one another not only in name and appearance, but also in behaviour, for there is considerable interplay among members of the family so that one member tends to identify with another: Noah is the son of a smaller hero who, in turn, is the son of a smaller hero. The problem of identity is central to the novel as Noah seeks to discover himself, and he does identify with his grandfather even though they have partly rejected each other. After the robbery at Panofsky's, Shloime confronts Noah: "We've got a lot in common, you know. We're both lone operators, eh? We both like *shiksas* — dames — and we both don't give a damn about eating kosher." Noah interrupts sharply: "We've got nothing in common." Though still doubtful of his directions in life at this time, Noah is right in refuting this attempted branding of him, rejecting his uncle's psychological kinship as well as his criminality in order to achieve individual freedom. However, when the recalcitrant switches his tactic of identification from himself to Melech, the identification is much more difficult for Noah to deny and he senses that he has come closer to the target of Noah's identity crisis. Whereas earlier Noah rejects any resemblance to his young uncle, now he simply stares at him, horrified, unable to respond. Just as Noah and his grandfather have reversed roles, it occurs to Noah that "Shloime was his father turned inside out." Like the "shifting of the ghetto sands," these shifting roles between grandfather and grandson, and between oldest and youngest sons, make it difficult for Noah to emerge from the Adler cage as a free individual.

Substitution of another member of the family for oneself is a means of self-deception or evasion of the problem of identity. The son does not become a man until he has stepped out of his father's shoes; the father cannot remain a man as long as he pins all of his hopes on his children. Melech's justice toward his children is nothing more than self-punishment: he takes the belt to Shloime only to punish himself and purge his guilt-ridden conscience; he wants to punish Noah because he had loved Helga and had deserted her. Son and grandson become scapegoats for him, and out of this confusion among members of the Adler family, Noah must forge his own identity. When Noah discovers the past relationship between his grandfather and Helga, he thinks that the old man did wrong to punish the family. By the end of the novel Noah realizes that his young uncle had been wrong in his identification of grandfather and grandson, for the harsh patriarch, in Noah's place, would have told his grandfather that his youngest son had started the fire. Noah, however, substitutes human mercy in

place of Melech's divine justice thereby cutting some of those familial ties which confine and confuse.

If Noah rejects identification with his uncle and his grandfather, he also refuses to replace his father after Wolf's death for his mother's sake. He "won't be another of her dead saints that she can take down off her shelves and dust like her bits of china." Noah refuses the roles that his relatives want to impose on him, unwilling to play the drunkard to satisfy his uncle's needs for him to be the family's alcoholic. Uncle Max thinks he can count on his nephew for political purposes since Noah is the son of a hero, but Noah responds by mimicking his father's gestures. "Standing in the darkness, he wiggled his ears and raised his eyebrows. Experimentally." Having mastered and negated the lupine role, Noah succeeds in his experimental parody, for he is able to sort out the interrelated lives of his family and arrive at an identity independent of the other Adlers. He will be neither martyr nor scapegoat; his father had been both.

An additional complication in these intermeshed lives involves the two women in Noah's life — his mother Leah and his lover Miriam, a French Canadian with a rather Hebraic name. For Noah the women became interchangeable, just as various men in the family are interchangeable, and ultimately he must reject both in order to gain freedom. They hold on to him tenaciously, presenting him with another dilemma: forced to choose between two women, he rejects both. Leah is the Biblical wife of Jacob; in the novel she is the daughter of Jacob Goldenberg whom she loves far more than her husband.[4] Miriam's cleaning up after him reminds Noah of his mother, and his relationship with her begins to duplicate the maternal one. Like Leah, Miriam needs security; she has no identity of her own, no inner strength, no vision. There is a dichotomy in her approach to living just as there is a dichotomy in Noah's existence: part of her wants the security that is Theo and another part of her wants love. She remembers that Noah had once said that the decision she had come to in choosing Noah in place of Theo had been no decision at all. Noah, on the contrary, weighs his choices throughout the novel and by the end makes his choice.

But before Noah can make the proper choice to arrive at his own identity, he must be able to distinguish right from wrong, and positive from negative within himself, his family, the ghetto, and the world beyond. When Noah first appears as the novel opens, he is outside of the ghetto in a rented room, yet the magnetic pull of his ghetto memory forces him to think of Aunt Rachel, his mother, his father, and his grandfather. Outside he feels empty, lonely, and isolated; inside he finds the atmosphere stifling and imprisoning. Divided between the two

worlds, a tightrope walker, he must distinguish and choose the boundaries for his own existence to liberate himself from the imbroglio of family relationships.

Richler turns immediately from Noah to a description of the ghetto, a labyrinth through which the Adlers wander aimlessly and out of which Noah must emerge having selected the proper path. Although it has no real walls and no true dimensions, it exists, and it is up to Noah to discern what is real on either side of these illusionary walls. The tripartite ghetto has its own distinctions according to vertical social mobility: the Queen Mary Road Jews, the Park Avenue Jews, and the St. Lawrence Blvd. Jews, each group reflecting the three generations of the Adler family and stages of Noah's development. These class differences appear at the cemetery. "A green iron fence separated the synagogue lot from the lots of other congregations and societies. The Workman's Circle lot was located on lower land. Marshland. Distinctions did not end at the grave after all." By leaving the ghetto Noah is able to gain the proper perspective to understand the dimensions, distinctions, and deceptions in his Jewish background.

As soon as Richler completes his description of the ghetto, he returns to Noah's room on Dorchester Street and delineates the boundaries of rectangular downtown Montreal which also define and make distinctions. Once he leaves the ghetto, Noah becomes perplexed (Richler's rapid structural transitions mirroring his character's wavering state of mind): "He had expected that by moving away from home something wonderful would happen whereby he would end up a bigger and freer man. Instead, there was only this anguishing. . . . At home his indignation had nourished him. Being wretched, and in opposition, had organized his suffering. But that world, against which he had rebelled, was no longer his. Seen from a distance, it seemed full of tender possibilities, anachronistic but beautiful. . . . All the dictums of the ghetto seemed unworthy of contempt in retrospect." Noah remains ambivalent as a Jew and a Canadian when he tells his grandfather: "everything is falling apart around you. Your sons are Canadians. I am not even that. . . . I'm sort of between things." Noah has to reject his negative views, his opposition to his environment, and substitute positive commitment in order to become a man who overcomes confusion.

Throughout the novel Noah recognizes the need to combat his self-destructive, nihilistic tendencies. "It's not enough to rebel, he thought. To destroy. It is necessary to say yes to something." "Noah had renounced a world with which he had at least been familiar and no new world had as yet replaced it. He was hungering for an anger or a community or a tradition to which he could relate his experience." This quest for the positive and renunciation of the negative recur after his father's death when he spends time with his mother's side of the family in Ste Agathe.

> Ste Agathe had been a revelation. A shock. The people, the laws, that he had rebelled against had been replaced by other, less conspicuously false, laws and

> people while he had been away. That shifting of the ghetto sands seemed terribly unfair to him. If the standard man can be defined by his possessions, then rob his house and you steal his identity. Noah had supposed himself not to be a standard man. But his house had been robbed and his identity had been lost. He was shaken. Not only because he felt a need to redefine himself, but because he realized, at last, that all this time he had been defining himself Against. Even death was something he did Not Want. He avoided Panofsky. That man knew what he wanted. What he wanted was positive and required a bigger reply than No.

This passage marks a transition in Noah's search, for he is able to find the "positive" in an individual whom he respects. Before leaving for Europe, Noah discovers the positive answers to Miriam's earlier questions thereby solving his dilemma.

> He could tell her that he wanted freedom and that innocent day at Lac Gandon and the first days of their love and many more evenings with Panofsky and the music of Vivaldi and more men as tall as Aaron and living with the truth and maybe, sometime soon, a wiser Noah in another cottage near a stream with a less neurotic Miriam. Oh, he wanted plenty. I'm free, he thought.

Perhaps Noah's realization suggests Richler's view of the proper way of life for the ethnic community: the Jew should not define himself through negative insecurities and defences in response to anti-semitism. As Noah says, "there is a certain kind of Jew who needs a *Goy* badly," the way his grandfather "needs the *Goyim*." Instead, Richler advocates the replacement of false dimensions with positive commitment to ethical, aesthetic, and scholarly traditions.

If Noah's major philosophic change is from negativism to a positive affirmation, his second conversion is from relativism to independence. Originally he remarks, "Nothing is absolute any longer, Mr. Panofsky. There is a choice of beliefs and a choice of truths to go with them. If you choose not to choose then there is no truth at all. There are only points of view." This relativism or subjectivism is in direct opposition to Melech's absolutism with all of its stern answers. By the end of the novel Noah wants to abandon his previous position and deny relatives and relativism. "He wanted some knowledge of himself that was independent of others." Through independence and affirmation Noah sees the distinctions, makes his choices accordingly, and gains his identity.

The shift from relativism to existential independence, in place of confused interdependence, occurs in Noah's belief in God, a theological and ethical problem posed by the novel's epigraph, "If God did not exist, everything would be lawful." He contemplates Dostoievski's statement: "He began to understand that God had been created by man out of necessity. No God, no ethic — freedom. Freedom was too much for man. I was wrong to worry about God, he thought. I don't believe in Him so He doesn't exist. My grandfather believes in Him so He does exist." This relativism brings him to an existential position: "I

did not make my mother to suffer or my father bewildered, or my grandfather hard. I should have had the right to begin with my birth. . . . It's all absurd, but here I am." Later he distorts the epigraph: "If God weren't dead I guess he'd be editing *Time* today." Creating his being out of virtual nothingness, Noah dismisses the theology as well as the ethics of his immediate forefathers.

Noah's humanity, love, and mercy supplant his grandfather's sense of divinity, justice, and punishment. For the elder, what is lawful (in Dostoievski's hypothesis) is absolutely clear because of his firm belief in God. The first and last sections of the novel end with almost the same words: "Each man creates God in his own image. Melech's God, who was stern, just, and without mercy, would reward him and punish the boy. Melech could count on that." So, for him, everything is lawful or full of law *because* God exists; nevertheless, when frustrated, he admits: "There is no justice in this world. God don't listen always. Not like He should, anyway." Retributively he is punished by his grandson's love. Whereas earlier their love had been severed by an indelible slap, reminiscent of the slap Duddy Kravitz receives from his father, Noah kisses his grandfather at their final encounter. "After he had gone Melech touched his cheek and felt that kiss like a burn. He touched his cheek and felt that he had been punished." The novel comes full circle as Noah's love punishes and defeats his grandfather's injustice.

STRUCTURALLY, RICHLER DIVIDES THE NOVEL according to the seasons. The stifling heat at the opening suggests the ghetto's claustrophobic atmosphere, and autumn in the second section is likened to the family's threats and Melech's laws which are "like autumn leaves that, once flung into the wind, scattered and turned to dust." "Autumn had come swiftly to the ghetto. The leaves . . . tumbled downwards dead." Section Three begins with a description of Montreal's frozen winters followed by spring thaw, while Section Four returns to the summer of Wolf Adler's funeral. "Ah, it was a fine day. You can have your slap-dash of an autumn day with insanely bright leaves falling at your feet, you can have the dreams of your loose spring evenings that end up being just dreams, you can even have all the snows of winter, but give me a white day with a blue sky and a dazzling yellow sun." These seasonal descriptions provide the atmosphere for Richler's Montreal, natural beauty contrasting with the sterility of coal and cast iron inside the ghetto. Like Simcha Kravitz but unlike A. M. Klein's "Jewboy" in "Autobiographical" who "Dreamed pavement into pleasant Bible-land," Melech Adler looks down from his balcony and frowns at the weeds struggling up through fractures in the sidewalk. When Noah returns to visit his mother, he notices that her Japanese gardens are not thriving in the sun. "The rubber plants, shrivelled, had been bleached brown. The soil had turned to dust."

This contrast between seasonal, natural beauty and the ugliness of the ghetto is spelled out musically in Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. "The first time Noah had been to a concert the orchestra had played *The Four Seasons* by Vivaldi and he had been so struck by it that he felt something like pain. He had not supposed that men were capable of such beauty. He had been startled. So he walked out wondering into the night, not knowing what to make of his discovery. All those stale lies that he had inherited from others, all those cautionary tales, and those dreadful things, facts, that he had collected, knowledge, all that passed away, rejected, dwarfed by the entry of beauty into his consciousness." This aesthetic revelation of true beauty contrasts with the revelation of false beauty in the lives of the Goldenbergs.

The passing of the seasons also points to the importance of time, for if the ghetto can be defined according to its illusionary spatial borders, it can also be defined in temporal terms. The walls of the ghetto are the habit of atavism, while Queen Mary Road with its well-to-do Jews rejects history: it is a street without a past.

Memory plays an important role as Richler resorts to flashbacks to portray Noah's past. Noah remembers a Friday evening long ago at the hall of a local youth group where the speaker had been an angry Polish Jew with bad memories; his parents had been killed in the concentration camps and he had been "swindled by memory." Noah listens to the speaker beside his friend Kogan whom he has already committed to memory, like other ghetto children who are ghosts of the past. Melech lives in the past because of his strict adherence to the Judaic heritage, but this is undercut by his secretive past with Helga, the dancer, "Dancing away from him, like the years." He never forgets his God whereas his grandson believes that in order to be liberated from God one must *forget* Him, but then wonders whether one can forget. Noah's mother also lives in the past as she repeatedly recalls the light at her father's death. The relationship between Theo and Miriam is founded on mistaken memories before the war. "Memory swindled them. That wretched night took on glamour in retrospect." Richler repeats the same phrase that he had used earlier to refer to the Polish Jew at the youth gathering and later to refer to Wolf's death. Memory is a swindler, for it can rob the present of its truth and substitute a false past which acts as a crutch to support those who cannot cope with the present. When Miriam leaves Theo, she "expected that there would be a sadness shared, or a kind exchange for the sake of memory," and when she lives with Noah in Ste Adele her insecurity about the present forces her to think about the past. "The time of beauty and the wild years too, Chuck and Theo, Paul, were all stale memories. She dipped into these memories the way other women dip into their knitting-bags." Soon she starts "to dip more critically into her memories." As Miriam reverts to the past, Noah sees her as passée, and asks himself, "What do you do with used people?" Thus, the

past is a false escape from the present, and the future, though hopeful for Noah, remains a question mark at the conclusion of the novel.

In the end does Noah manage to break free from all of those confining and restricting forces — the walls of the ghetto, the cage that the Adlers inhabit, the padlocked box, and the string that tightens around his heart? During a rainstorm up in the Laurentians Noah senses the freedom away from the prison of the ghetto as he imagines himself to be a horse galloping to the top of the highest hill, his own Ararat, and braying louder than thunder. But his answer is silent, for ironically, he keeps secrets from those in the family who previously had attempted to withhold the truth from him. He internalizes the secrets of the padlocked box: first, he does not reveal to his mother the truth that his father died looking for money; second, he conceals from Melech the fact that Shloime set fire to the offices; and third, he does not inform Max that his secretary Miss Holmes — whom Max trusts absolutely — has been using him all along. He eats out of her hand as long as she keeps sugar in it.[5] This St. Urbain "horseman" with blinders is a different breed from Noah whose clear sight penetrates the façade and welter of his family to gain a new vision of himself.

NOTES

[1] These criticisms have been made by the *TLS*, July 29, 1955; by George Woodcock in the "Introduction" to the New Canadian Library Edition of *Son of a Smaller Hero*, reprinted in *Mordecai Richler* (Canadian Writers), pp. 23-29; and by Hugo McPherson in *Literary History of Canada*, ed. Carl Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 714.

[2] Desmond Pacey, *Creative Writing in Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1952), pp. 265-66. Compare the image with D. G. Jones' list in *Butterfly on Rock*.

[3] The heroism may be judged by comparing the act with that in Adele Wiseman's *The Sacrifice* when Isaac rushes into the burning synagogue to save the Torah and later questions the meaning of "heroism." *The Sacrifice* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1968), p. 212.

[4] A parallel stereotype may be found in Leonard Cohen's *The Favourite Game* where the son must flee from a domineering, widowed mother.

[5] The reader is able to recall Noah's first encounter with Miss Holmes in the Café Minuit, though may not immediately recognize her. More troublesome is the introduction of Jerry Selby in the Bar Vendôme and his reappearance later. If Miriam had been his intimate secretary, she should have recognized him; otherwise why does Richler bother to mention the name of the minor character?