

NEED FOR LAUGHTER

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AS HE WRITES *St. Urbain's Horseman* Mordecai Richler is thinking both comedy and music, and he's thinking them on what used to be called the grand scale. At the outset a number of major themes are introduced and they unite, as they alternate and recur, into his larger comic theme, call it the fortunate pratfall of Jacob Hersh. As theme gives way to theme, a shuttling weave, Richler adjusts the tone and tempo, calling on all of the writing secrets he has mastered over some twenty years in order to orchestrate his comedy of a sad yet exuberant and spiky Jew.

JAKE'S SPIKINESS derives from the same Montreal ghetto in which Duddy Kravitz served his apprenticeship in the 1959 work that made Richler's reputation as an important novelist. Duddy figures in *St. Urbain's Horseman* as a minor motif, a childhood pal of Jake's who is now negotiating his talent for swindling into a fortune. This latter-day Duddy closely resembles his earlier self — up to a point. As a first successful step toward millions he markets a remarkably effective diet pill, the secret ingredient of which is tapeworms. When a chemist cracks the formula, Duddy disappears into a maze of swindles within swindles, leaving the consequences to his partners and the complications to a large number of extremely thin customers. Same old Duddy. But not quite. For in diminishing him from a major to a minor figure Richler also diminishes his earlier potentialities. As apprentice, Duddy plunged so thoroughly into his attempts to out-con the world that he began to move beyond mere swindles to more interesting human possibilities. But in the *Horseman* the possibilities have vanished. He's all millionaire, and not much more. His fondest latter-day aspiration is to get his eyes and/or hands up those slopes which begin at the hem of

every passing London mini-skirt. And his rueful self-appraisal — “Who in the hell could love Duddy Kravitz” — cancels his earlier potential as a young man with a consuming appetite to gobble the whole world. It’s, in little, as though Falstaff were to grow thin, honest, and genuinely contrite.

Yet Richler robs Duddy of his large hunger for the world deliberately, in order to hand it over to friend Jake in form of a somewhat different hunger. While minor figure Duddy is making his moves to where the money is, major figure Jake makes his to where imagination might be, as a television and film director of some distinction. Yet only some, for he is shown as good but not all that good, successful but in curiously compromised ways, and ambitious but given to fumbling his best chances away. At first glance this might seem the portrait of a man who can’t quite make it up the ladder to where the sweet life begins, intense gratification of having reached the top. But looking again, it becomes evident that Richler is searching elsewhere through Jake’s eyes, not the effort to get up, but a need to climb down. Jake positively doesn’t want the sweetness, deliberately insults important persons, consciously consorts with film-world nobodies, and eventually cultivates the malevolent Harry Stein. To make friends with Harry is like holding hands with an unexploded stink bomb, sure to go off. When it does, a great stench settles in around the good name Jacob Hersh. Yet the steps by which Jake moves from respectability to disgrace are waystations of a deeper search, his dream of his older cousin, Joey Hersh, the Horseman.

Joey grows up in Montreal as still another of Richler’s nothing boys, son of a disgraced father who deserts the family; of a mad and madcap mother who also disgraces him, every other day; and brother of Jenny, who early on establishes and then maintains a reputation as one of the more reliable town pumps. As her outspoken mother says, “she’s a whore”, but for free, come almost whomsoever. One miserable 1937 winter day her brother disappears and for six years, no Joey. Abruptly, one fine 1943 spring day, along shabby St. Urbain’s Street, lo a fire-engine red MG. From which steps a transformed Joey, with an endless supply of cash in hand. And a dazzling procession begins, clothes from the most exclusive shops, mysterious, beautiful women from some posh, long-legged sexual heaven, brooding phone calls from faraway places — shades of Gatsby from over the way in New York. And the whispered legend starts. Did Joey fight against Franco in Spain, is he a communist, did he visit Trotsky in Mexico? Was he, in between times, a pro ball player, a licensed pilot, an actor in Hollywood, a man with underworld connections at the far end of those phone calls, in hiding, even being hunted down?

If adolescent Jake is fascinated by these intimations of an heroic life, he is even more fascinated by a transformation in Joey from the typically timorous St. Urbain's boy into an assertive, at times a dangerous Man. When Joey gets drunk, as he often does, he exudes hard-bodied, hard-eyed menace. When some French-Canadian toughs beat up a young Jew, Joey organizes a counter-attack which lands a local dignitary's son in the hospital. Vengeance is ours, saith Joey. But the Jewish fathers, frightened, apologize. When some other French-Canadian boys intimidate Jake and Duddy at the local ball field, Joey comes along and intimidates the French-Canadian boys. Later he will fight the Arabs in the 1948 war. Most crucial of all, he will become, in Jake's imagination, The Horseman, and also the Golem, in Jewish tradition a body without a soul, searching through the world to revenge the loss. It is the infamous Doktor Mengele, one of the monsters at Auschwitz, that Jake believes Joey is pursuing. The dreadful image at the heart of Jake's nightmares is of women in the outhouses while other women crouch, drinking contaminated water from an adjacent stream. Enter the good Doktor to bring in sanitation by destroying not the outhouses but the women.

Over the years it's become clear that Richler is essentially iconoclastic, almost invariably asserting tough-minded scepticism in the face, under force, of the modern world — kid me NOT! Letting cousin Joey be Jake's hero, his vision of a redeeming manhood for Jewish men, Richler consciously selects a sleazy hero, made up of the sleazy kitch boys dream along St. Urbain's street. Seeking revenge for Mengele's monstrous treatment of Jewish women, Joey himself mistreats women, deserts a wife and child in Israel, swindles another woman in London, and plays the petty cheat to each next town he passes through. Beyond adolescence Jake never does catch up with Joey except in dreams, Nazi-haunted nightmares into which, fleetingly, his cousin rides, mounted in a magnificent Plevin stallion.

Neighing, the stallion rears, obliging the Horseman to dig his stirrups in. Eventually he slows. Still in the highlands, emerging from the dense forest to scan the scrub below, he strains to find the unmarked road that winds into the jungle, between Puerto San Vicente and the border fortress of Carlos Antonio Lopez.

This is Paraguay where 40,000 escaped Nazis are thought to live, Mengele included. But vengeance is not Joey's, saith Mordecai Richler. Beyond his dream of his cousin as Horseman and Golem, Jake falls into step with a London body even more lacking in a soul, Harry Stein, the Jewish Iago, pure venom, gratuitous

hatred, malice incarnate. Ride along with Joey in your dreams and there will be a shift in which you tag along with Harry. All German girls beware.

To understand how Jake makes the transition from dreams of Joey to friendship with Harry, the reader needs to understand Harry's dim-witted mistress, Ruthy. And to understand Ruthy one needs to consider first, Joey's sister, Jenny. Every good writer is likely to have at least one well that is always coming in, from which words will flow almost easily into place. For Richler this natural resource has always been Jewish lowlifers: in *St. Urbain's Horseman*, the Hersh family. And how Richler loves it, and how he hates it, the intense, hot, heavy interest that fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, uncles, cousins and aunts all take in one another to the exclusion of every other interest. Jenny, the most intelligent of the Hershes, recognizes the almost incestuousness of such closeness when she tells Jake that brother Joey returned to Montreal that fabled spring of 1943 because "he wanted to fuck me," and that he left to avoid doing so. Jenny wants out of the hothouse, so she elects for self-education in art, literature and philosophy. As such, she becomes Jake's muse and he "her acolyte". Jake, grown up, remembers her solitary, back-bedroom study light gleaming through late St. Urbain's hours; remembers Modern Library books, a map of Paris, a drawing of Keats, Havelock Ellis, the *Saturday Review of Literature*; remembers how he "had revered her, how she had once excited him." Given the double pull, of reverence, as for a muse, and excitement, as for a mistress, it's all but inevitable that Jake will follow after when she makes her move to escape from Hershville.

But such an escape! Out of the family warming oven into the pale fires of the Toronto culture-establishment by way of a calculated marriage to Doug Fraser, whom Richler portrays as perhaps the most asinine playwright CBC Radio ever encouraged in all its long history of encouraging asinine playwrights. However, Jenny marries Doug, not for the imagination he doesn't possess, and not for a sexuality which he also doesn't possess, but as a way to become reigning hostess for Toronto writers, artists, directors and producers. Much of her success as hostess consists in her willingness to go to bed with whomsoever, except her husband (reluctantly) and Jake (not at all). That woman who discovers she has become the eternal feminine for a particular man — Jenny for Jake — will realize that in order to be his muse she had best not be also his mistress. Swallow my cousin, cousin swallow. When adolescent Jake wants her she lets him fool around but then tells him to go home and grow up. When he does grow up and still wants her, she declines and sleeps instead with Duddy, driving Jake dotty. But it will be at one of her parties that he gains entrée to his career as a film

director and meets his eventual best friend, the genuinely talented writer, Luke Scott. A career and a standard by which to judge that career. Fleet sweet swallow.

But enter Richler's scepticism, clipping her wings and pouring salt on her tail. Just as cousin Joey is a sleazy hero, cousin Jenny is a sleazy muse, the best that circumstances provide for St. Urbain's boys, but very much bargain basement, damaged goods. However, the scepticism is not to be understood as simply Doubting Mordecai with a moted eye for all the things that are under the sun. It's that he distrusts muses, at least the kind that Jake takes to be soul of his soul. There is a direct connection between Jenny in Montreal and Toronto, and Ruthy in London. For lame-brain Ruthy is the would-be-muse to end all muses, totally convinced as she takes on each next shabby lover that Goethe has re-occurred. And who is the first lover she takes on in these terms but cousin Joey, the Horseman. Who, having seduced and swindled her, rides off into the European sunset with her life-savings in his saddlebags. Enter her next lover — who else but Harry Stein, determined that Jake will make good for Joey, so that Ruthy will have savings *he* can swindle from her. Ruthy thinks that's super, since in her eyes Harry, who boasts a high I.Q., is at the level where "there's Gertrude, there's Ep and there's Ein." Moving from his pre-occupation with Joey and Jenny to his pre-occupation with Harry and Ruthy, Jake enters into some of the finest passages in the novel, in which he revels in their shoddiness as one might indulge a madness in order to be rid of it. Because muse Jenny still knocks at inner chambers of his being, Ruthy's atrocious capacity for adoration answers. Because hero Joe still rides his dreams, Horseman and Golem, Harry appears, vengeance incarnate. Before whom place a delectable dish, a statuesque German girl, Ingrid. Threaten her. Strip her naked. Rape her. Bugger her. Fellatio. Down on hands and knees. Put Joey's saddle on her back. Get out Joey's riding crop. Mount, whip, and ride to your revenge for Jewish women crouched by Auschwitz outhouses drinking their own shit-fouled water as prologue to the even more horrible gas chamber cantata, writhing and clawing their way to the very top of death's most vaulting ambition. Small wonder that Jake Hersh is a hypochondriac. Fears success. Marries a Goy.

But vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. Through the screen of lies Ingrid, Harry and Jake need to tell in court, it's clear that Jake is scarcely guilty as charged. His great mistake is to arrive home unexpectedly, get involved with the drunkenness of it all, and become understandably indiscreet. He does fondle her. He does pinch her, viciously, to his surprise. But when she goes suddenly onto her knees and fumbles at him, he pulls away. And when Harry begins the saddle

and riding crop routine, Jake quarrels, gets angry, and shoves Ingrid rather roughly out of the house. All of which the jury comprehends. Also the judge, who is hard on Harry, whom he despises and sentences to seven years, and on Jake too, whom he deplors but lets off with a suspended sentence. However, the real judge of the event is a sceptic named Mordecai. And as he's wincing with the pain of it all, he's smiling, a benevolent scepticism. He knows that in depths of himself where the invisible worms fly in the night Jake is guilty, his dream of Joey leading him into league with Harry to heap humiliation on the tender flesh of the German girl. So he winces. But he also knows that by letting his creature Jake act out the nightmare, he, Jake, will arrive at knowledge of how ridiculous a nightmare it all is, how little he is actually interested in such revenge: a grope, a pinch, and a push. So judge Mordecai aids and abets the crime in order to cure the criminal, lets Jake follow Joey toward revenge and meet Harry, the exact man for the job, Iago come round again to arrange the denouement.

But what a fraud of a vengeful fellow this Harry Stein proves out, an inept Iago who selects, among other things an entirely wrong victim. Judge Mordecai makes it clear that pretty Ingrid is a mostly compliant baggage who assumes that anal, oral and genital intercourse are simply what people do on sexual occasions — as, indeed, they do. Iago Harry went too far and did hurt and humiliate her — for a while. Otherwise she experienced it all as another one of those odd evenings in a long series. The greatest damage to her pride was probably when Jake pushed her out of the house, Gott in Himmel, all this and no screen test too! And though it did seem weird to be down on her hands and knees with Joey's saddle on her not-so-pure Aryan back, ready to be whipped and paraded past wherever it is the shades of the Auschwitz women huddle, it doesn't seem at all weird to judge Mordecai, the smiling sceptic who arranged it all. He sees it as the ludicrous end point of Jake's bad dream. Under a law of rueful laughter, the sentence he imposes would seem to read, in the vernacular, come off it Jake Hersh, dark is not the colour of your true love's hair. You are no inverted Jewish Mengele, twisting toward revenge. You are what you actually are, a spiky Jew up from St. Urbain's street, needing to be a spike since modern times have small room for sensitive plants, as I, judge Mordecai, also spiky, can testify. But be a golden spike. And at the end, the ridiculousness burned deeply in burning the bad dream out, lo, friend Lucas Scott drives up in his shiny fire-engine red reputation, the best writer in town, offers his best script to best friend Jake to direct. The sweet life. And Jake hesitates, weeps for the death of cousin Joey, the

Horseman, but accepts, for once malleable. And a golden thread takes over from the invisible worms now fled into some other night than the one from which Jake has awakened.

A comic world then, the spirit of which is not from dark to darker to darkest, but from dark to lighter to laughter, and release. Harry Stein is certainly the worst news Richler has given us to date, with his obscene phone calls, nasty put-downs and ugly feelings. But the passages that spell him out contain some of the most elated writing in the novel. If he were true Iago no one could laugh. But as a failed Iago he's a very funny nasty fellow. The portrait of Harry reveals the reality of Richler's scepticism, which has always been the main fact met in his novels. Just as it cuts against everybody's pretensions that they are better than they actually are, it cuts against fears that they are worse. A humane, a forgiving scepticism, then, the test of which is not in some officious pronouncement — I AM THE HUMANE SCEPTIC — but where it belongs, in the writing itself, the upbeat music that takes over when awful Harry and awful Ruthy make their appearances. They are unbearable — look the other way! — but the writing itself rescues them, allegro, so that, like Jake, the reader tags along. However, in other parts of the novel there are problems.

FOR AN OLDER GENERATION of writers in Canada, young Mordecai Richler must have seemed rather markedly a wild one in much the same way as the older Irving Layton and younger Leonard Cohen seemed also wild — then. And so he was — then. His brash, wrong-side-of-the-tracks writing rushes make the more considered styles of Hugh MacLennan and Morley Callahan seem almost elegiac. But time plays funny tricks, and in our speeded-up world doesn't wait around very long before playing them. To a newer generation of writers it's doubtless Richler's prose that seems elegiac, inviting comparison, not forward to the much more open, freely improvisational modes in which they work, but back to modes they have all but abandoned. This isn't enmity, a new wave of artists who would like to see Richler's ship sink. Surely, no serious writer or reader can fail to appreciate the magnitude of his attempt to create a symphonic novel, the four movements, the many themes that weave congruently through the entire work, the animated writing with which he attempts to achieve a comic triumph of spirit over some grim modern realities. But respect it as they may, it will doubtless be precisely the imposed superstructure from which a good

many younger artists will flinch as being an unnecessary burden for any writer to carry on his bent and straining back. *Heavy, heavy* often does hang over his typewriter.

Never more so than when the upbeat writing he needs in order to sustain the upbeat intention of the work becomes strained, particularly in the burlesque passages that recur intermittently throughout the novel. These passages are an old and puzzling story in Richler's writing — fragments of film scripts, newspaper items, letters to Jake from pathetic, backwoods TV aspirants, a do-it-yourself I.Q. test — you too can be a Harry Stein — and, most important, a number of zany episodes that mock the social, sexual, marital lives and times of Toronto and London establishment sophisticates. These burlesques do double duty in the novel. Musically they occur as a kind of running scherzo, sounds of life's whirly-birds crooning through crazy days. Thematically they explore and present the public level of Jake Hersh's life, just what kind of wacky modern wonderland it is to which he (and all the rest of us) are more or less Mad Hatters. The difficulty occurs when such passages strain in their reach towards laughter and become insistent, unfunny. For instance, the evening that Jake and his wife have dinner at the home of his attorney, Ormsby-Fletcher.

It begins with Jake's awareness that given the conflicting lies he, Ingrid and Harry will be telling in court, the logic of their testimony will count for rather less than the presence on his behalf of an "upright plodding WASP" lawyer. With dull propriety itself at your side how could you possibly be guilty of unspeakable carnalities? If you grew up along St. Urbain's Street you know how to con, and Jake did and Jake does, deftly manoeuvring Ormsby-Fletcher into accepting his case. Which of course makes Jake eminently respectable in the eyes of Ormsby-Fletcher, positively his favourite Jewish sex pervert. And his wife's favourite too. Hence the invitation. Everybody knows that the English have the most revolting food sense in the civilized world so the meal becomes a series of soggy lumps. Afterwards Mrs. Ormsby-Fletcher enthuses (with fluted voice) over examples of (it's her special interest) paintings by cripples, teeth paintings, toe paintings, maybe even armpit paintings. Given Richler's bawdiness it's a little surprising that she doesn't bring in work by some paraplegic Modernist who has given up brushes entirely to become the first penis painter, now nurse if you'll just . . . When Jake goes to the john (vetting the hamper for glimpses of the lady's lingerie), the toilet — ah England — plugs. And what to do with the contents? Scoop it all up in his shorts and throw it out the window? Or smuggle it to the downstairs john, one hopes in working order? Or smuggle himself

downstairs, establish his presence there, and let four-year old junior take the rap for the mess upstairs? Which latter, Jake does.

Few readers are likely to object to bathroom humour per se — shades of Swift, Rabelais, Henry Miller, the human race generally, half the jokes we tell. Or to a demolition job on English uppah claws ridiculousness. In art there are always rooms to spare, including those furnished with hostility à la Freud insights into wit and laughter. Burlesque, by which the enemy is turned into a caricature of himself, has always been a favourite style for such furnishings. Richler's characteristic enemies are establishment people, the mad hatters at the top of the social heap, the insufferable ways in which they lord it shabbily over the rest of us. With lowlife vulgarity he is very much at ease. The true vulgar leads after all to the vulgate, that common tongue which the artist can then subtilize, humanize, liberate, a natural stamping ground for the comic spirit. But the highlife vulgarity of establishment people — Mrs. Ormsby-Fletcher — destroys subtlety, humanity and freedom by revelling in the shoddy, the banal, the pretentious. So the hostility that Richler feels does him credit. Nor can there be any objection to the burlesque masks he assumes in order to project that hostility; vengeance is mine saith the artist, slyly. It's the writing itself that poses the difficulty, the ways in which it tightens into a forced hilarity and loses comic resonance. This is very much like those evening gatherings at which people, laughing hysterically, demolish some common enemy. Played back the next morning, with all the giggles gone, the exchanges are likely to be singularly unfunny. For this reader the Ormsby-Fletcher passage, and a number of others in the novel, are like that — the next morning.

The difficulty may be a double one. It takes a good hater to write successful burlesque, one able to revel in a happiness of malice made sweet. William Burroughs for instance — his savage joy. Richler never seems quite able to revel. Like his protagonist, Jake, he is perhaps too forgiving, gentle. Thus one of the funniest passages in *St. Urbain's Horseman*, the middle-aged film makers' softball game on Hampstead Heath, is no burlesque at all, but delicious roly-poly slapstick. Strictly speaking, these film folk are much more dangerous enemies of art than ridiculous Mrs. Ormsby-Fletcher. They are establishment vulgarians who have long since converted film-making, which they control, into a shoddy game of wheel and deal, no mystery, no beauty, no power, just wheel, just DEAL. However, Richler writes them into place as a collection of huffing, puffing, show-off teddy bears for whom he feels not hostility but an amused affection. Hostility need not enter because he is seeing them as lowlifers, clowns

to their own careers, whose wheeling and dealing takes on authentic comic resonance as they play ball in order to, like they say, play ball. My favourite is the one who can't decide whether to hit a single, a double or a triple because not sure whether it would be more politic to talk to the first, the second or the third baseman. So he strikes out. However, when hostility enters and the burlesque masks go on, Richler's writing tends to tighten into a more strained grimace. Which is to laugh — and write — the hard way.

But the more important difficulty must be traced to Richler's symphonic superstructure. Once he establishes burlesques of modern life as a major theme of the novel he must write a certain number of such passages, whether he feels like it or not. This is linear imagination at work, with a vengeance, since by page 10 he has committed himself to four such themes that he will need to sustain through what turns out to be a long 467 pages of writing. Or a short 467 pages if one considers the various economies he needs in order to keep any given theme in balance with the others. All writers know it is difficult enough to sustain the tone and tempo of even a single theme over a period of days, weeks or months. What happens when the feelings in which the theme is grounded just go away? Smoke writing. To sustain four themes, each with a somewhat different tone and tempo, and at the same time to shuttle back and forth in order to weave them into a larger, unified comic progression from movement to movement to finale is a task for imagination that can be thought either heroic or over-burdened. A further difficulty in the writing, the frequent intrusion of expository asides in the midst of narrative passages, argues for the over-burdening.

Novelists are supposed to kiss and tell, but they are usually expected to dramatize, visualize or sound the kissing and telling, not simply to explain that Jake is happily married, has grown weary of modern literature, or is a small "I" liberal who realizes that his very comfortable life style scarcely squares with his feelings about world misery. Goethe said it long ago, critics are dogs, yapping at artists' Achilles tendencies, and it seems all but certain that Richler will be faulted for the too-frequent intrusion of this expository bridging. Which is what it seems to be, a shorthand way to keep one or another theme moving and evolving those times he is out of patience with direct presentation. Or, more likely, is struggling to keep one theme in balance with the others, a problem in harmonics. Thus, by simply explaining that Jake is "immensely pleased" or "enormously amused" Richler confirms the comic nature of the place without having to pause and present the pleasure or amusement. Yet when he must explain, it's clear that he

realizes the reader might very well be concluding otherwise, say that Jake must be horribly depressed or not one bit pleased. However, the real issue is not the intrusion of the expository asides per se. There is no law that says a novelist cannot explain those times he isn't interested to present, just as there is no law that says a critic, or anyone else, cannot narrate, dramatize or sound his responses. All writing is art and all writers should have access to all of the possibilities that language affords. It's more apropos to ask, do the expository intrusions stay lively enough to sustain, even enhance, the general liveliness Richler is seeking in creating his comic vision of Jake Hersh. I think not. When they occur, it's a little like listening to upbeat music momentarily interrupted by someone talking, not from the audience, but from the midst of the music itself. Such intrusions mar that animation which is the soul of this novel. They occur least often in just those passages where Richler is at his lively best, the portraits of Harry Stein and Ruthy, and whenever Jake for old time's sake, or for need, goes on back home to Montreal.

When he is at home with the various Hershes (or they visit him) the tempo is held at a quick-handed fast, and the tone stays sceptical. But it all dips down — sweet chariot — to some undersurface where sad is singing to sad, laugh and chatter as they will. There is a beautifully modulated passage in which Jake, about to quit college, goes to a delicatessen with his father, divorced from his mother. The crass jokes — “fart smeller, I mean smart feller” — become muted sounds on some cracked harmonica that the father discovers he can no longer play for the son, try as he will. Similarly, when his mother comes to London the modulations are superb, the sweet chariot herself, patting her breasts, preening her body, seducing her grandchildren, cutting out the competition, effacing herself into the centre of attention, and my boy, my boy, my buoy. Who left his Maw long years ago, as her direct, accusing glance reminds him at the airport — the husband gone, the children gone, you Yankel too — what's left for hot-house eyes?

The passages that give us the mother and father open a way, perhaps, to where the comic genius that rules over this novel dwells. To follow Jake's feelings along lines that lead to inner chambers of their defeated but animated lives is to reach a place where there is no laughter at all but anguish instead that human existence needs be so grim an affair, *felt* as grim — the tawdriness of his father's life and reactions to life, the obsessive stupidity of his opposition to Jake's marriage, the ugly pathos of his illness and death, the even uglier travesty of his funeral. Nor is the father alone in this lower world, for shade comes to join

shade, the defeated mother, Joey, Duddy, Jenny, Ruthy, Harry Stein, all as well afflicted by tawdriness, ugliness, stupidity, defeat. And for silent chorus, hooded, the Auschwitz women, the excremental lilies, in life less than excrement. It is from this grim region that the resonance flows which moves into the best, most elated writing in the novel as the desolation is redeemed into a comic vision. If Richler sends Jake to melancholy places, it's in order to arrive at a genuine, a felt need for laughter. It is when he moves away from the need into contact with merely social ugliness, stupidity and defeat — the world of the establishment whirlybirds — that the writing turns non-resonant and strains for its effects. There can be no desolation at heart over the Ormsby-Fletchers' foolishness. They are merely foolish. As Jake might well say, who needs them! And because need doesn't enter in, because there will be no second dinner at their home, no necessary third to still the voices of desolation, there can be no deep resonance to underlie the reach for laughter. So the writing strains because the comic superstructure moves in with its relentless insistence — and there must have been times when Richler wondered why — that he be a funny fellow.

SWIFT, Yeats says,

. . . has sailed into his rest;
Savage indignation there
Cannot lacerate his breast.
Imitate him if you dare.

It will be to Richler's everlasting credit, since works of art endure, that he does dare to imitate Swift, in more than a few ways. *Gulliver's Travels* was the first English novel to take advantage of symphonic form, inadvertently since the form itself was only just coming into being. In *Gulliver* there are the four lively movements, liveliest of all being the third, a swirling prose scherzo, all over the geographical and thematic place. And the fourth movement, in Houyhnhnm-land, recapitulates and resolves the themes woven into the first three. Which is a way of saying that *St. Urbain's Horseman* is *Gulliver* come round again. Most of the writing devices Richler uses have sanction, in that Swift also used them. Just as Swift laces burlesque passages through *Gulliver*, Richler laces them through *Horseman*. Just as Richler intrudes expository asides into his narrative, Swift intrudes even more of them into his: passages concerning law, education,

family life, written in over Lemuel's shoulder. And both writers hold to the crucial rule that, as their scepticism cuts the ground from beneath their protagonists' feet, redemption will occur not in pronouncements but in the act, the art of writing. If the human spirit is to prevail over the grimness of things, it will prevail in the interstices of the words themselves: "there is a music at the heart of things."

And there is another decisive similarity, though it leads to an even more decisive difference. Both novelists choose as protagonist a fool whom they then trap into experiences which will reveal and, they hope, cure the foolishness. Gulliver doesn't seem exactly cured at the last, since he's mad enough to believe that he's almost a horse and likes it that way — farewell mankind! Yet he's an awfully human horse. If you met him trotting down the street, you'd be less likely to weep for mankind lost than to smile. Jake isn't exactly cured either, since he does leave the question of Joey's death open, implying that he might some day climb back on to the nightmare desire that vengeance shall be Joey's, Harry's and his. But the similarity that leads to difference is a deeper one. Both Lemuel and Jake are atheists; Jake by direct acknowledgement of the fact that throughout his ordeals he never once calls on God's help, as his creator did every evening of his adult life. Which means that both fools must call on their human resourcefulness to outface or outfox the surrounding grimness. But Swift takes Lemuel's atheism as the basic foolishness that branches out into all his other idiocies, driving him finally outside human boundaries, to Horseville. Richler takes Jake's atheism as a source for his tenacious humanity, the stubbornness with which he clings to fair play for such sorry specimens as Joey and Harry Stein. Swift, then, is on God's side, laughing, while Richler is on man's side, needing to laugh, trying.

Because this is so, Swift would see Richler playing the fool to his fool by imposing on him an untenable proposition that mankind can go it alone. Yet were he to sail on out of his rest and re-appear on a sudden London to tell Richler so — fool Mordecai! — it would surely be a double sign. Sign of his belief that God forgotten is man abandoned. But sign also that the Horseman from Canad-hnhnmland has written his way into the kind of company he, Swift, always did prefer. Which is a long way for a spiky boy from St. Urbain's Street to have travelled. Even Duddy, swindled out of his role as major figure, would be impressed. And one see's Horse Lemuel trotting briskly along, but turning solicitously to Horseman Jake, flat on his back again: You see Jacob, we Houyhnhnms have been doing this longer than you Canadhnhnms.