

# MORDECAI RICHLER

## *Craftsman or Artist*

*Naim Kattan*

**I**N AN ARTICLE which he wrote for the special number that the American travel magazine *Holiday* recently devoted to Canada, Mordecai Richler said:

Finally, the best influences in the world reach us from New York. The longest unmanned frontier in the world is an artificial one and I look forward to the day when it will disappear and Canadians will join fully in the American adventure. To say this in Canada is still to invite cat-calls and rotten eggs. We would lose our identity, they say, our independence. But Texas or Maine still have distinctive identities and we are even now economically dependent on the United States.

This is the logical conclusion that can be glimpsed behind Mordecai Richler's whole literary output and behind the intellectual and psychological processes from which it springs. Before accepting the argument of the cultural supremacy of the United States, this Canadian novelist explored all the ways which might have led him to a vigorous affirmation of the cultural autonomy of Canada.

The journey of Mordecai Richler in fact runs along two parallel lines which are actually projections of the same hunger and the same will to succeed; he is an adolescent doubling as the child of an immigrant.

This immigrant's son was born at a time when a middle class was beginning to take shape in the heart of the Jewish community. The child who first saw the light in the old Jewish quarter of Montreal shared the dreams and hopes of a generation which was born in Canada and wished to gather with both hands the possibilities of that American land. For that purpose, it was necessary for him to detach himself from his family, from his group, from his quarter. How

could this be done when the family and the quarter, the traditions of the group and the customs of the household, were inextricably mingled together?

In such circumstances the young man chose to reject them all at the same time. He had neither the determination nor the intellectual power to disentangle the overt and the hidden forces which formed the texture of the collective life in which he had been forced to participate. He therefore chose, as his first step, escape.

His hostility to Canadian provincialism was accentuated by the presence of a provincialism which seemed to him even narrower and which gripped him like an iron halter — that of the family. To affirm himself, he must prove himself not merely as an adult, but also as a man open to all the widest horizons of the universe. He therefore departed from Canada. The ancestral land was neither his destination nor his first port of call. Following the steps of the Lost Generation, this young pilgrim wished to demonstrate that the world in all its breadth belonged to him. Breathing the smoke-laden air of the bars of France and Spain, he thought in this way to pose his candidature for inclusion in the great company of powerful and adventurous writers. But in imagining that he was following in the steps of Hemingway, Richler deceived himself, for he was merely reviving once again and in a more complicated manner the adventures of a past decade described by Bud Schulberg in *What makes Sammy Run?*

**A**T THE AGE OF 22, Richler's first novel, *The Acrobats*, brought to light one of the richest promises in the young tradition of Canadian literature. *The Acrobats* is in itself a mediocre novel, but, though it has all the pretentiousness and all the imperfections of a beginner's work, it reveals qualities which could equally well be those of a clever craftsman or those of a true writer.

Richler uses every means to avoid speaking directly of Canada and particularly of Canadian Jews. He sets his stage as far as possible from St. Urbain Street — in Valence, in Spain. The complex intrigues, fruits of a fevered imagination, hide imperfectly the real anxieties of the young novelist. Since timidity and bashfulness prevent him from speaking in the first person, Richler disguises his characters to the best of his ability, clothing them in borrowed garments which barely hide the conventional faces of the wicked who succeed and the good who are defeated.

His Canadian hero is not Jewish. He is an English-speaking painter who

wishes to mingle with Jews but merely succeeds in making pregnant a daughter of Israel who dies from an attempted abortion. The real Jew is a bar-keeper, a gentle and corrupted American, generous and unscrupulous, who has lost his bearings and, despite all Richler's efforts, does not emerge as a cynic.

In his second novel, *Son of a Smaller Hero*, the masks fall away. Richler does not speak in the first person, but the autobiographical tone of the book is not entirely deceptive. It is the world of his own childhood that he reveals in fictional form. The adolescent hero deprived of childhood takes his revenge. He sits in judgement on a family which has cut him off too early from an affection he desperately demanded. Three generations face each other: the adolescent Noah, romantic, sentimental, ambitious; Wolf, the father, the false hero; and the grandfather Melech, the patriarch, the guardian of the treasure handed on from generation to generation. The symbolism of the novel is too easily unravelled not to make mention of it. Wolf passes for a hero because he saves from the fire a box which everyone believes contains the rolls of the Torah but which, in his mind, only contains money. Noah is therefore right to rebel against parents who exploit authentic traditions merely to distort them, to empty them of content and meaning. Fortunately the grandfather is there to remind one that this religion which his unscrupulous children have debased had once, in an age now departed, a truth that has since been obscured and concealed.

The adolescent cannot cross the frontiers of the ghetto without doing violence to himself. He is too much affected by the traditions which nourished his childhood for him to be able to reject them except by force. It would be treating this rage of youth too seriously if we were to elevate Richler into the censor and critic of a whole community.

It is to his family that the hero owes a grudge; it is his family he accuses of not bearing the same love and feeling as he does toward a doctrine which he would like to maintain in its pristine purity, that is to say, without modification by the demanding laws of existence.

This is clearly the mental process of the adolescent. And this is what gives the novel movement, if not power. The ambitious youth who has made his reckoning with a narrow society is propelled by an irrepressible impulse. He wishes to deal as a man with adult problems. After all, has he not set himself free? Has he not said what he thinks of those who do not see beyond the wall of the ghetto? Now he must face them with the proofs of his initiation into manhood.

In *A Choice of Enemies* the ghetto, instead of vanishing, gains ground. The young Canadian leaves his country in search of horizons as wide as his ambitions.

He is Canadian, and it is as a Canadian that he wishes to affirm himself. New York? It is too near, and too much like home; he would be drowned there in the mass of thousands of immigrants' sons who hope to devour ravenously the fruits promised by a powerful and prosperous America. In London this subject of the Commonwealth feels that he might not be lost as he would be in a North America that refuses to take his Canadian characteristics seriously. But in the metropolis of the mother country "the aliens knew only other aliens." All the Canadian and American intellectuals, those in flight from McCarthy's America and those seeking the roots of their Canadian origin, are merely tourists when they get there. "For even those who had lived in London for years only knew the true life of the city as a rumour."

In this novel Richler places himself in the centre of great world problems. He brings before us the ex-Communist who fled from East Germany, the ex-Nazi, and a whole assortment of North-American fugitives who keep meeting in that vast city as if they were living in a little village where everyone knows everyone else, knows his petty habits and his grand manias. It is a novel in which skill is more in evidence than true passion.

In *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* Richler returns to his childhood. He has not yet said all there is to be said. To the bitterness, the surly anger of *Son of a Smaller Hero* is added the dream of a world in which frankness, straightforwardness and love reign together. Great is the disenchantment of the unfortunate child who has put all his hopes in the mystery of non-Jewish society and has found there the same recurring faults as elsewhere.

Duddy Kravitz and his brother are both ambitious; they are children who have emerged from the slum and long to fill their lungs with the air of the great outdoors. One of them wishes to become a possessor, to affirm his power by material conquest. The other thinks to obtain prestige and the respect of Society by his studies and his medical profession. It is a young French-Canadian girl who — for Duddy — symbolizes all the mysterious beauties and inexhaustible enchantments of the unknown world which lies beyond the ghetto. But his unhealthy ambition drives him to destroy the loyal love which gratifies him yet which he can do nothing but annihilate.

His brother gains admittance to a closed circle of Anglo-Saxon Christians. It is a bitter victory, for this world conceals nothing but moral corruption and disintegration. These young people of good family come together in order to drink, and as a sign of friendship they ask of him a service which shows how much they really despise him. They ask him to use his medical knowledge to procure an

abortion. The world that is to be encountered outside the walls of the ghetto is hardly a pleasant one.

In this novel, which is without doubt its author's most accomplished work, one can measure his talent against his limitations. Stirred by a demanding passion, he is led to destroy his characters through caricature. Facing a society which he wishes to conquer, he has no time to look at it, to understand it, to perceive its complete ambiguity. His characters are linear, for complexity would deprive them of the artificial consistency which is fabricated by a novelist whose wish to do battle is stronger than his desire to comprehend. This world without love or tenderness is at once sentimental and false — false because sentimental.

Richler manipulates situations and characters to fill a void which no degree of inventiveness can conceal. He does not succeed in breaking the yoke in which his sensibility imprisons him, for he takes no account of the sensibilities of others, and especially of his characters. These are his banner-bearers, the extensions of his own tastes and whims.

It is evident that Richler, who burns with the desire to plunge into the great ocean which he sees beyond the walls of the ghetto, can never quit St. Urbain Street. Whether he walks in England, France or Spain, he carries everywhere his little world, his secret fatherland, for he never succeeds in completing and going beyond his adolescence, which is its product.

In his last novel his choice is made. He is the master of artifice and appearance, and he intends to demonstrate the fact. In fabricating his caricatures he goes to the limit of his powers. He no longer pretends to create living personages or complex situations.

*The Incomparable Atuk* is a great piece of farce in which the child of the ghetto, once again disguised behind the mask of a fake Eskimo poet, makes his conquest of a world of imposters and hollow men. Richler turns his vengeful anger against all those personalities of swollen reputation and unmerited celebrity who people the intellectual world of Toronto. All of them are provincials puffed up with their false importance, blinded by their degree of influence, corrupted by the ambient complacency. The adolescent who reproached his parents and society in general for responding meagrely to his longing for purity, now directs a burst of mocking laughter against a world which was to blame for the mutilation of his dreams.

THE GREAT DEFEAT and the true failure will be those of Richler himself if he has made his long journey merely to resign himself in the end to marching in step in the ranks of that immense army of script-writers from Hollywood and the various Madison Avenues of the world who fill the pages of the popular magazines and put interminable dialogues into the mouths of the protagonists of the soap stories of television. Can he overcome his sensitiveness? Will he be able to outgrow his childhood? Richler, who is still young, might discover in time that the kind of success he obtains will prove ephemeral if the craftsman in him kills the artist. Recognizing the power of American culture is not itself an insurmountable deterrent. After all, he can tread in the paths of Bellow and Malamud instead of those of Jerome Weidman and Herman Wouk.

