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Canada's Mordecai Richler and Zionism

“A Man Without Land is Nobody”

Josh Lambert

Calling Mordecai Richler (1931-2001) the greatest of all Jewish-Canadian writers does not, at first, seem like much of a compliment to him. Could a pond that small have produced a truly big fish? Richler's obituaries honored him by asserting that he was that and much more: a prolific and versatile author of novels, essays, screenplays, and children's literature; an outspoken voice against Quebecois nationalism; a curmudgeon, a celebrated expatriate, and an omnivorous satirist. Much touted has been the popularity of his last novel, *Barney's Version*, in Italy, where the author's name reportedly has become an adjective (*Richleriano*) meaning “politically incorrect.”

Whatever impact he made abroad, Richler was distinctly Canadian and Jewish, and there is nothing meager about his accomplishments when viewed from a local perspective. The Montreal he staked out as his literary turf was, at the time, the largest city in Canada and, alongside New York and Los Angeles, a world center of Yiddish culture and Jewish population. At least two other major Jewish literary imaginations, the poet and editor A.M. Klein and the Nobel laureate Saul Bellow, emerged from that milieu, but neither of them, for all their achievements, returned to it as faithfully or captured it as memorably in fiction as Richler did.

Critics and prize juries loved him. He won the Canadian Governor General's Award for fiction twice, for *Cocksure* (1969), and *St. Urbain's Horseman* (1972), as well as the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for *Solomon Gursky Was Here* (1989), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. His mastery of dark comedy is evident in a classic children's story, *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang*. Because he constantly contributed essays and columns to newspapers and magazines in Canada and abroad, and as his opinions and prose were never dull, he was one of the nation's most beloved and most controversial pundits.

The 1959 publication of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, Richler's fourth novel, marked a turning point in his career. *Duddy* attracted significant attention to its then little-known 28-year-old author. It was reviewed positively, if briefly, in *The New York Times Book Review*

and the *Times Literary Supplement*, and made enough of a stir to attract charges of anti-Semitism from the Canadian Jewish community not unlike those lobbed by American Jews, that same year, at Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*. Richler's book remains a favorite among writers; novelists including John Irving and Gary Shteyngart have expressed their admiration for it in recent years. *Duddy* will also likely be remembered because of a 1974 film version, starring a young Richard Dreyfuss, for which Richler garnered an Academy Award screenwriting nomination. More than forty-five years after its initial publication, the novel remains in print and continues to attract popular and critical attention.

Yet Richler was misunderstood throughout his career: a lover of Judaism and of Canada, he was often accused of hating both, especially by those who opposed his politics or were stung by his satire. So perhaps it should not be surprising that *Duddy*, too, has persistently vexed critics.

The novel traces the adolescent development of Duddy (*né* David) Kravitz from his earliest days as a wiseacre tormenting his high school teachers on the snowy streets of Montreal, to his amateur business ventures, and concluding with his first major success as a “big time operator.” Among the teenager's get-rich-quick schemes are attempts to run a roulette game at a summer resort, to illegally import and sell pinball machines, to broker scrap metal deals, and to be the first-ever Bar-Mitzvah videographer. These plans result either in tragedy or in farce, but each somehow inches Duddy a smidgen closer to his goal: to raise enough cash to buy a tract of land, including Lac St. Pierre, in the Laurentian mountains of Quebec. Duddy fixes on this aim from a very young age, when his grandfather tells him that “A man without land is nobody.”

Surrounding Duddy in the ramshackle world of the St. Urbain Street ghetto are a cast of weaklings, fools, and swindlers. Duddy's mother is dead. His father, a taxi driver and occasional pimp, doesn't have much faith in his youngest son. Duddy's grandfather, Simcha, is a diminished, stubborn old man, and his brother Lenny is an academically gifted dimwit who performs an illegal abortion and then drops out of medical school. Duddy's other relation, Uncle Benjy, is a miserable, self-loathing Communist-inclined capitalist, who favors Lenny and treats Duddy like dirt.

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In lieu of family support, Duddy cultivates allies whom he can manipulate. His "Girl Friday," a selfless French-Canadian named Yvette, he treats like a combination secretary, maid, and prostitute. And he takes even worse advantage of Virgil, a simple-minded epileptic American, whom he hires as a truck driver despite the obvious dangers.

Meanwhile, Duddy admires and courts the favor of Montreal's *machers*, Jewish and gentile. There's Jerry Dingleman, a.k.a. the Boy Wonder, who has achieved the status of a big time operator through gangsterism and drug-running. There's the wealthy WASP, Hugh Thomas Calder, who drops hundred-dollar bills into urinals to see which of his friends will pick them out. Irwin Shubert, Duddy's senior by a few years and at one point his merciless co-worker, manages despite his innate cruelty (or perhaps aided by it) to become a successful lawyer by the end of the novel. And then there's Cohen, a successful businessman, who lectures Duddy on what might be called business ethics:

You think you run a scrap yard for twenty-five years next September without accidents or law suits or under the table pay-offs or lies? There's not one successful business man I know, Duddy, who hasn't got something locked in the closet. A fire, maybe. A quick bankruptcy, the swindling of a widow...funny business with a mortgage...a diddle with an insurance agent. It's either that or you go under, so decide right now.

Together, these shady characters echo a credo espoused in the Williamsburg novels of Daniel Fuchs, an earlier Jewish chronicler of ghetto life: "Everybody who makes money hurts people." Hoping to claw his way out of the poverty of St. Urbain Street, Duddy faces a zero-sum game with socioeconomic success on one side and moral behavior on the other. As Arnold E. Davidson points out in a reading of Richler's novel, Duddy's fate is constrained by the world in which he lives: either he will become a predator or he will be swallowed up.

Critics have failed to connect this ambivalence about socioeconomic success, however, with the book's historical context. The novel's action takes place in 1947 and the years following. This is a story structured around a Jewish boy's obsessive mantra that "a man without land is nobody," set during the years of the founding of the Jewish state—and, still, searching through all the scholarly articles on *Duddy*, I discovered only a single critic who even mentions Zionism. That critic, John Ower, writing in *Modern Fiction Studies*, refers to Israel only to advance an aggressively anti-Zionist agenda that has little basis in Richler's fiction. "Richler obviously regards Zionism," Ower writes, "as a soft sentimentalism which is regressive both psychologically and culturally." This ungrounded attribution of an anti-Zionist attitude to

November 25, 1947, for "an end to the British Mandate...and the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states," and when, two days later, this plan was approved by a vote of the United Nations, Richler describes the jubilation on St. Urbain Street:

In our neighborhood, people charged out into the streets to embrace. Sticky bottles of apricot brandy, left over from a Bar-Mitzvah here, a wedding there, were dug out of pantries, dusted off, and uncorked.... Horns were honked. Photographs of Chaim Weizmann or Ben-Gurion, torn from back issues of *Life* or *Look*, were pasted up in bay windows. Blue-and-white Star of David flags flapped.... Many wept as they sang "*Hatikvah*," the Zionist anthem....we gathered at the house on Jeanne Mance Street [the Habonim meeting place], linked arms, and trooped downtown singing "*Am Yisrael Hai*," ("The People of Israel Lives"), and then danced the *hora* in the middle of St. Catherine Street...bringing traffic to a halt.

Can we ignore the link between the history celebrated in this passage, which so clearly affected Richler and the Jews of St. Urbain Street, and the contemporaneous attraction Duddy Kravitz feels for his grandfather's statement that "a man without land is nobody"?

At moments, the text of Richler's novel even supports a reading in which Duddy's pursuit of Lac St. Pierre can read as allegory for the Zionist pursuit of the State of Israel. The land Duddy dreams of developing will provide him, he imagines, with the same advantages Israel was meant to provide for the Jews—he describes his land as a place where he will be safe from "superior *drecks*" who would laugh at him or run him off. When Duddy visits the lake alone one winter night and loses his way, he thinks, "What in the hell am I doing lost in a blizzard, a Jewish boy? Moses, he recalled from *Bible Comics*, died without ever reaching the Promised Land, but *I've* got my future to think of." Here the metaphor is explicit: Duddy is Moses, and the land he strives for is his Promised Land. The final confrontation between Duddy and Jerry Dingleman reinforces this analogy between Duddy's Lac St. Pierre and the Zionist state. Dingleman compares Duddy's grandfather's wish for land to the desires of the Yiddish poets who "in their dark cramped ghetto corners...wrote the most mawkish, school-girlish stuff about green fields and sky." The dream of land that Duddy has fulfilled might as well be the Zionist desire for a country. Yet aside from highlighting Richler's consciousness of the parallels between Duddy's story and the Zionist narrative, emphasizing these allegorical moments serves little purpose. After all, in *Duddy* Richler tells a fundamentally realistic, comically exaggerated, story that is too grounded in the details of '40s and '50s Montreal to be reduced to a political fable.

Instead, *Duddy* can be read as Richler's attempt to grapple with the issues of patriotism, land-ownership, and identity that would have naturally been on his

mind in the late '50s, given his allegiances as a Canadian Zionist. *Duddy* expresses Richler's ambivalence—one which he shared with many North American Jews—as a Diaspora Jew who cared enough about the establishment of the State of Israel to dance, sing, and stop traffic on the day of its founding, but not enough to settle there.

One way that Richler manifests this ambivalence is through the honest depiction of fractiousness between various Jews. When Virgil, Duddy's epileptic, non-Jewish American assistant, says, "You're a Jew and wherever you go other Jews will help you," the reader cannot help but recall that the novel is full of Jews who either refuse to help Duddy or make special efforts to humiliate him, like Irwin Shubert and Jerry Dingleman. With the establishment of Zionism, the Jews may be a "sort of international" as Virgil says, but that will hardly prove a miracle cure, Richler reminds us, for the divisions and tensions within that community.

Richler also manifests the ambivalence of the Diaspora Jewish communities by mocking the notion of Jewish boys as soldiers. A set piece early in the novel titled "THE MARCH OF THE FLETCHER'S CADETS" depicts Duddy's high school class marching "left, reet, left, reet," military-style, through the streets of Montreal. Richler uses this march as an opportunity to break from his traditional prose style into a modernist, abstract, and onomatopoeic panorama of the ghetto, rife with satirical asides and digressions. In general, the parade emphasizes the teenagers' childish antics in counterpoint to the serious business Duddy gets himself involved with later in the novel. The cadets, taunted by a "gang of kid brothers and sisters," and defecting in pursuit of smoked meat sandwiches, have not a shred of military dignity. One overheard exchange is particularly telling:

"Jewish children in uniform?"

"Why not?"

"It's not nice. For a Jewish boy a uniform is not so nice."

With its characteristic Yinglish syntax, this last remark represents the older generation's bemusement with the military parade. In 1947, when these scenes are supposed to have been taking place, and in the late '50s, when Richler was writing them, Jewish boys, some as young as Richler's high school students, were wearing uniforms, carrying rifles, and engaging in warfare, among other places, throughout Palestine and the State of Israel. The Canadian Jewish teen "soldiers," however poor, are spoiled and cowardly next to their peers in Palestine, and the adults' discomfort with military display shows how out of touch they are with the realities of the wider Jewish world. The comparison serves Richler in one of his main satiric goals: to belittle the St. Urbain Street milieu as small and small-minded, ridiculous in its pretensions.

The discomfort of the older generation with Jewish boys in uniform echoes Jerry Dingleman's assertion that old men like Simcha Kravitz and the composers of Zionist Yiddish verse are not prepared to deal with the reality of having a land: "They want to die in the same suffocating way they lived, bent over a last or a cutting table or a freezing junk yard shack," Dingleman says, instead of, presumably, dying on a kibbutz in Galilee or on a battlefield with the Irgun. In these moments, Richler displays his recognition that the older generation of Montreal dreamers who taught him about Zionism were, like most idealists, not entirely prepared for the means that would be necessary to achieve success. For the most part, they themselves were not ready to fight, and neither were they prepared to send their sons.

Richler nonetheless portrays *aliyah*—the immigration of Diaspora Jews to Israel—as one of just two options for a young Canadian Jew to escape the troubled Montreal world in which he must fail either socioeconomically or morally. (The other is immigration to Europe, the path that the author assigns to Jake Hersh in *Duddy* and chose for himself in life.) Cohen's business ethics lecture, the scene that most explicitly lays out Richler's vision of the inevitable link between socioeconomic success with moral failure in Canada, suggests that *aliyah* is, in fact, an option—"you want to be a saint? Go to Israel and plant oranges on *kibbutz*"—just not for a guy like Duddy, who would never be satisfied with agrarian life, or with sainthood.

Still, for those unlike Duddy, who cannot "make [themselves] hard," as Cohen commands, *aliyah* is an option. One of the few sympathetically presented characters in the book, Bernie Altman, mentions "that when he graduated from McGill he was going to go to Israel." Lennie, Duddy's brilliant but socially inept older brother, victim of WASPs and the cut-throat

Irwin Shubert, announces near the end of the novel that he plans to marry his girlfriend and make *aliyah*: "I think any Jew worth his salt ought to go. What is there for us here?" Duddy's only half-sarcastic response—"Balls all squared"—is a reflection of the young schemer's suitability for life in Cohen's morally fraught universe: he simultaneously acknowledges the emptiness of the Diaspora, and accepts it. So, too, does his next statement: "It's hard to be a gentleman—a Jew, I mean—it's hard to be. Period." Duddy mocks Lennie's naïveté and moral sensitivity, but also expresses the lack of easy answers, the moral complexity he faces in every choice. One can only guess that if Duddy were an idealist—if he believed he could be a saint—he might, like his brother and Bernie, choose life in Israel even over ownership of Lac St. Pierre. But he doesn't. He can't. Richler thus ultimately portrays Zionism both as one of the few alternatives to the dead end of Diaspora living, and, simultaneously, as a utopian dream that is not an option for his most real, most troubled, and most compelling characters.

In *Duddy*, Richler rejects all idealisms. Along with any pieties about upward social mobility and the harmony of Jewish life in the Montreal ghetto, he likewise casts off the teachings of his Zionist boyhood, in which the State of Israel is regarded as the answer to the problems of Jews in the Diaspora. For Richler, like many of our best satirists, there are no answers at all, only more problems. Zionism—like any ideal—is a dream, for better and worse. Richler should not be read as a critic of Zionist ideology, but as an opponent of utopianism, as an honest and unflinching chronicler of the flaws and hypocrisies of every grandiose plan and the sacrifices necessary to pull off any scheme. Richler's point about Zionism, and about life, is simply, as Duddy himself admits after he wins his land, that whatever you strive for and achieve, "You pay a price." •

SOMETIMES I DREAM IN YIDDISH

Sometimes I dream in Yiddish
sometimes I imagine I can fly
sometimes I desire quick hands
like Slapsie Maxie Rosenbloom had
so I can knock out the bad guys.
Sometimes when I dream in Yiddish
I tell my parents, long dead, things can be undone
sometimes when I imagine I can fly
I bomb installations and strategic depots
before they can be used to mutilate and maim history.
Sometimes when I desire quick hands
I knock out several SS officers with one-two punches
quick hands, quick thoughts, quick retribution
sometimes I dream in Yiddish.

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