



Università
Ca' Foscari
Venezia

Corso di Laurea Magistrale (*ordinamento ex
D.M. 270/2004*)

In Lingue e Letterature Europee, Americane e
Postcoloniali

Joint Master's Degree in English and
American Studies

Tesi di Laurea

Hyphenated Identities in
Mordecai Richler's Novels

Relatore

Ch. Prof. Pia Masiero

Laureanda

Viola Galvani

Matricola 823462

Anno Accademico

2012/ 2013

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Ca' Foscari
Dorsoduro 3246
30123 Venezia

Acknowledgements:

I thank my parents, Elide and Roberto, and all of my friends for supporting me spiritually. A special thanks goes to Sofia and Claudia.

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Introduction

The definition of Jewish-Canadian identity is far from being an easy task: in the Jewish-Canadian identity two cultures meet, namely the more ancient Jewish culture and the more recent Canadian one, on Canadian soil. The first part of this dissertation aims at analysing and discussing the main aspects of these two cultures in order to highlight their similarities and differences in the attempt to define a Jewish-Canadian identity, which is necessarily hyphenated, because of its dual nature. The distinctive trait of such identity, whose features will be explored in the first part of my thesis, lies precisely in the word 'hyphenated.' After an examination of the main traits of Canadian and Jewish history and literary traditions, it will clearly appear that even though there is an identity proper to Jewish-Canadians, this identity is definitely not steady and it will be widely questioned in the course of the analysis. I will look at this complex issue through a specific and circumscribed lens: Mordecai Richler's novels. I deem this to be a fertile way to tackle this theme as Richler is not only a renowned novelist, but also a journalist and satirist, who represents an icon of modern Canadian written production. The importance of his writing is not simply found in his excellent novels: as a matter of fact, his characters, whose features will be further analysed from many points of view, are expressions of this non-unitary but distinctly Jewish-Canadian identity. To bring this multi-layered identity into focus, I will deal with the representation of Montreal from the writer's viewpoint, not simply because it is an essential feature in Richler's writing but also because it represents a special example in the Canadian panorama due to the considerably vast presence of Jewish-Canadians; in the second chapter I will deal with hyphenated identities in Richler's novels, particularly focusing my attention on two novels, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *Barney's Version*, but I will draw a mapping of Jewish-Canadian identities also basing my thesis on many heterogeneous novels by Richler, such as *The Incomparable Atuk*, *St. Urbain Horseman*, *Salomon Gursky was*

here, and *Son of a Smaller Hero*. The third and last chapter will eventually deal with Richler's choice to represent anti-heroes as his novels' protagonists instead of traditional Jewish heroes, and the purpose and importance of the employ of humor, satire and black humor in his novels.

1. Cultural Background and Canadian Identity in Richler's Novels

1.1: Jews on Canadian Soil

Margaret Atwood has outlined the main aspects of Canadian literature in her guide *Survival*, highlighting how Canadians are obsessed with the fear of succumbing, both as individuals and as a country. She writes: "The central symbol for Canada – and this is based on numerous instances of its occurrence in both English and French Canadian literature – is undoubtedly *Survival*, *la survivance*" (41). The reasons at the base of this common feeling are partly historical and partly cultural. As a matter of fact, despite an already existing literary tradition, Canada suffered, and is possibly still suffering, the dominant influence of both the European and the US traditions, to the point that its literary production was until very recently considered as second-hand or peripheral. Therefore, attitudes which might be linked to a 'colonial mentality' are not rare at all in Canadian literature: the existence of such literature was widely debated during the 20th century (Waltz), thus providing a rich material for parodies and humour in several Canadian writers, first of all Margaret Atwood who notably calls it 'Can lit'. In the following excerpt, Professor Neil Besner analyses the complex issue of post-colonialism in Canada: without denying the presence of such attitude, he tackles the question from a wider perspective, since a univocal definition would be too narrow :

"Is Canada Postcolonial?" No. It is not only that. Canada is not simply postcolonial because the formulation suggests that the story of Canada is only and simply a narrative about its evolution out of a colonial status, begging the chorus of questions about that inference outlined status, begging the chorus of questions about that inference outlined above. Canada is not postcolonial because the very idea of Canada implied in the question is too univocal, monolithic, monocentric, monocultural. Canada is not

unilaterally postcolonial; the various kinds of difference increasingly manifest in the culture – difference that were always integral to, even when not recognized by, the critical institution – are too vital to be subsumed, hitched together at any post. (Moss 48)

However, it is a common characteristic of Canadians to consider themselves victims: of foreign culture and language, of religion (Atwood), and also of other Canadian groups, such as French Canadians and the WASPs. Certainly, Atwood's viewpoint is only partially shared by Mordecai Richler, who is deeply involved in the quest of Jewish-Canadian identity, and in what this might mean. Nevertheless, Atwood's presentation of so called 'Can lit' is useful to understand Richler's production, not simply because by now it is a somewhat canonical take on Canadian literature, but because it may shed light on the concept of identity I am interested in. The exploration and definition of such identity can be explored in different ways: in Atwood's books and essays it develops through the communion with nature, seen as a sort of projection of the individual. In Richler's case, survival is strictly linked to his own origins as a Canadian, but also as a Jew deeply rooted in the city of Montreal. This double identity is both threatened and destined to survive because it is strictly tied to a specific time and place:

Richler had, by luck, a larger subject than his English contemporaries, and, though he would have eschewed anything as pretentious as a Big Theme, he had one: the transformation of a post-colonial culture in a post-modern age, the comedy of emergence from a cultural cringe at the price of vulgarity in cultural assertion. It was not exactly the usual Canadian subject – survival, the play between the vast nature and minor signs of human persistence – but, in its urban-Jewish specificity, in some ways more truly universal. (Gopnik qd in Webb 8)

According to Adam Gopnik there is not only the essence of Richler's work, but also his position in the Canadian context, and his contribution to the issue of post-colonial culture. The emergence and definition of his protagonists' identity concerns the emergence of his own cultural specificity, and the affirmation of a minority which is no longer a silent presence, but embodies the cultural variety typical of a multi-ethnic country and a post-colonial reality such as Canada. Richler's novels are veritable examples of comedies, and the comic side is often preserved. Moreover, there is a certain amount of so called 'vulgarity': with this term, Gopnik is possibly referring to the common issues that Richler prefers instead of greater subjects, but also vulgarity as "something belonging to common people." In fact, vulgarity originally comes from the latin word *vulgus*, which literary means the poorest and less cultivated part of the population, in contraposition to nobility. He is not writing about surviving nature, which is a typical Canadian subject, as Margaret Atwood teaches us; however, he is representing the survival and emergence of the part of the population he is interested in in more general terms, and in this sense it passes the borders of Canadian soil and becomes universal. The post-colonial dimension is here surpassed, and is finally substituted by the post-modern age and its complexities: not only does post-modernism affect the content of Richler's novels, but also their form. For instance, the extensive use of irony or some use of temporal distortion as well as physical and temporal confusion which are typical features of post-modernism are clearly discernible in Richler's novels. The reader can easily observe Richler's continuous attempt to lighten his prose and to stay away from a deliberately vast topic; however, the result is readable and enjoyable literature which deals with a 'Big Theme' almost in spite of itself. The 'Big' (and somewhat universal) theme emerging from Richler's pages is the definition of identity in modern post-war society.

A fundamental aspect of Richler's production is ancient Jewish culture. The majority of Jewish settlers on both the Canadian and the US Atlantic coast were Sephardic Jews,

namely of Spanish and Portuguese descent, while there was only a minority of Ashkenazim coming from central Europe: the few Ashkenazim soon identified with Sephardic institutions too. It was around 1850 that a consistent number of German Jews landed on the American coast in order to escape the conservative political environment in Europe at the time, and to look for political and religious freedom. Frustrated by the established Orthodox leadership and wishing to create a more tolerant environment, they guided the Reform movement, which was definitely successful on American soil and largely influenced the following generations of Jews. Due to a less extensive migration of German Jews and unlike the US, the Reform movement in Canada was not very relevant especially until after World War II, and the majority of Jews there remained Orthodox. Despite that, Reformed congregations increased in number in 1950s and 1960s mainly due to social mobility, acculturation and suburbanization. On the other hand, a large scale migration of Eastern-Europe Jews characterized the 1880s, thus considerably increasing the number of Orthodox Jews already present in both the US and Canada. As a distinctive feature, they spoke the Yiddish language, which then spread across the country, even though nowadays very few people still employ it, and formed the so-called *landsmenschaft*. *Landsmenschaft* means an association of immigrants from the same place, that have a shared cultural background and speak the same language, namely Yiddish. For this reason, Yiddish was not simply a means of communication, but also represented a strong bond among the members of the community.

Due to the need and wish to reunite under the Jewish doctrine, the beginning of the 20th century saw the birth of some educational institutions, for instance the ‘Hebrew Theological College’ and the ‘Yeshiva University’. The common tendency of Canadian Jews to affiliate in congregations, differently from the US example, where an inferior percentage of Jews belongs to Jewish institutions, is easily justified by the fact that American Jews were

already largely reformed, thus rejecting institutions, while Canadian Jews were not.¹ Furthermore, in the mid-1960s, there was a new migration of French-speaking North African Jews, who gave a new boost to Orthodox Jews. Despite some consistent differences between American and Canadian Jews, the ties between the Orthodox congregations were pretty strong, revealing a dialogue between the two countries: in spite of a larger number of affiliates in Canada than in the US, Canadian Jews looked to the US for religious leadership (Shoenfeld).

As a matter of fact, the term ‘Jew’ suggests both a religious and a national identity. For the purpose of my research it is particularly interesting to explore to what extent Canadian Jews felt they belonged to Judaism as a religion or Judaism as a national value. German immigrants brought with them the concept of Judaism as a religion, but many Jews changed their opinion in the late 1960s and 1970s due to the newly-born state of Israel: the great majority of North American Jews unsurprisingly supported the creation and affirmation of Israel, a land Jews might belong to. Nowadays the discussion is far from being concluded: on the one hand, some Jews strongly believe in the State of Israel and its meaning to the Jewish population; on the other hand, some do not identify with the image of such a state preferring to be part of the country they were born in. Due to the implications of secularism on the collective and the individual life of the citizen, Jews have different opinions concerning the state of Israel, and many of them prefer to continue living in their home country and not to make aliyah.²

¹ Tables 1 and 2 show a minor tendency among Canadian Jews to organize in congregation in comparison with US Jews. It appears also evident from the data reported that this aspect is linked to the limited influence of Reformism: therefore, Reform congregations were less numerous than their US counterpart (Shoenfeld 213)

² The immigration of Jews from the diaspora to the land of Israel

Apparently, Yiddish literature in Canada developed at the beginning of the twentieth century, the moment a large number of East European Jews escaping persecution arrived in Canada. They settled especially in Toronto, Winnipeg but most of all in Montreal, to the point that it earned the reputation of being ‘the Jerusalem of North America’ (Benson, Toye 1195). Active in community life and often covering important public roles, Jews played a relatively great role in society, and they became an even larger community after the Second World War, due the new wave of persecution in Europe. Canadian-Jew writers often focused on the themes of the Holocaust and Israel as their major topics.

To tackle Jewish-Canadian hyphenated identity it may be useful to combine the Canadian question by definition, “where is here?” (Frye), with the Jewish question “where was there?” In fact, the typical Canadian sense of loss very much linked to the wilderness, a topic raised in Atwood’s guide for instance, is associated with a more general sense of disorientation typical of a population used to migrate from state to state, and which looks back at its past only to find a succession of diasporas. The feeling of lack of references is common to both cultures, and this concept is well-expressed in Greenstein’s words: “Mediation, displacement, deferment, exile, absence, equivocal meaning – these are the themes not only of Deriddean interpretation, but of Jewish writing in Canada from Klein to the present” (Greenstein 13).

Hence, Jews feel a common feeling of disorientation, but here this sense of loss is paired to a typically Canadian disorientation, where the law of nature can demonstrate to be stronger than the law of men. In this way, the continuous search for the Jewish roots, summed up in the question “where was there?”, assumes a new meaning in a land potentially unspoilt such as Canada. Some Jewish writers interpreted with a special sensitivity the tensions among so many ethnic groups and the consequent problems of assimilation that each group must confront. It is worth remarking that the walls which divide those communities, real or

imagined, are both needed and rejected by the people living inside them. However, ghettos are also discriminating, and they isolate the same community from the rest of the Canadian population, on the same Canadian soil. Consequently, populations which share the same territory and possibly some cultural values erect a wall of separation rather than establishing relations of exchange, which is quite evidently a paradox.

What comes to the surface from these considerations about the Canadian and the Jewish identities, is that, despite some evident differences in terms of history, culture and language, Jewish writers are able to express some common feelings of disorientation which are typical of Canadian culture. Consequently and paradoxically, those two cultures find a common ground, and the distance between them is thus reduced. Therefore, the paradox in question, namely dealing with a tradition which is both very ancient, as far as Judaism is concerned, and very recent, as far as Canadian literature is concerned, turns out not to be a real paradox, but a newly born hyphenated culture instead. Both Jewish identity dealing more with tradition and Canadian identity dealing more with current issues, share a limited common ground on the common Canadian soil. In this sense, the feeling of 'displacement' assumes a new meaning, which finds its strength in an absence of points of reference: such a vast and scarcely populated land might provide a new space to both retrace the past and explore present identity.

Jewish writers hence are the voice not simply of Jewish culture, but of Canadian culture as well: their writing is the means of expression of an entire population questioning national issues represented by such questions as 'where was there?' and 'where is here?'. Their contribution as writers is an important form of creation. Writing has always had a special importance in Jewish culture, and the consultation of sacred texts is fundamental in such culture: God's word is expected to be studied in depth, without additions or cuts. Reading and studying is a central activity in the life of young Jews, and this becomes

manifest in religious practices, such as the Bar mitzvah, which means the son of the commandment for boys, and the Bat mitzvah, which means the daughter of the commandment for girls. In fact, the young Jew has to read out some passages taken from the Torah during the religious ceremony of Friday night and Saturday morning, and they have to interiorise God's word. In fact, the aim is to teach the children not simply to properly recite the sacred text, but most of all understand it in depth and to discuss some passages with the help of a religious guide in order to grasp the real meanings of such words. For this reason, Jews' relationship with writing is definitely special and written texts assume great importance in such a culture.

In the Canadian context, and particularly in the city of Montreal, writers were highly considered. As Rebecca Margolis explains: "In this Yiddish cultural milieu, writers held a special status: through the written word, they explored, molded, and expressed fundamental tenets of Jewish identity, where literature and ideology were inextricably linked" (27). The author is here referring in particular to press publications in the inter-war period, but the effort to maintain a Jewish identity also through other forms of written production appears evident from then on. What is highlighted here and further on in Margolis' text, is once again the birth and development of a specifically Jewish-Canadian sensitiveness, which manifests itself through the written publication of journals as well as poetry, translations, essays and so on. Such sensitiveness is common both to the ancient Jewish culture, and to the Canadian more recent culture, very much linked to the Canadian soil.

Initially, the publications were largely in the Yiddish language, which appeared extremely malleable because it was the means of discussion of definitely Canadian themes still maintaining a Jewish specificity. Montreal was and still is an important centre of Jewish-Canadian culture: it was the seat of innumerable publications, even though nowadays the Yiddish language has become obsolete. Margolis well presents the situation of post-World

War II: “In the late 1940s and 1950s, with growing awareness of the destruction of Eastern European Jewry, the persecution of Yiddish in the Soviet Union, and its suppression in the newly created State of Israel, the goal of Yiddish communities worldwide shifted from creative expansion to cultural survival” (47-48).

Interestingly enough, after this shifting to survival, which definitely appears to be a main feature of Jewish culture, particularly in the second part of the 20th century, the vehicle employed to communicate changed: the Yiddish language was no longer the engine by which to explore issues of identity, and English, due to the ‘anglicization of Canadian Jewry’ to use Margolis’ words, took its place.

A source of disorientation but at the same time of endless possibilities, identity as a geographical quest is definitely a main characteristic of Canadian people and Canadian writers in particular. This ‘geographical identity’ will appear in relation to the city of Montreal in the following subchapters, and more specifically in Richler’s novels in the second chapter: this chapter will especially deal with two of them, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *Barney’s Version*. Geographical and temporal changes affect Richler’s protagonists in several ways. As Greenstein maintains: “Breaking and joining with tradition, Jewish-Canadian memory rises out of lost homes and voices to populate a no-man’s land with figures of the imagination” (17).

Evidently, the lack of a fixed identity in a ‘no man’s land’ provides endless possibilities of creation: the rejection of a static identity inevitably leads to the construction of a multi-layered one, where the ‘voices’ of the past merge with the voices of the present. Canadian Jews, traditionally influenced by their European traditions, bring with them this legacy but at the same time trace the borders of the Canadian territory, both physically and mentally. It is a sort of mental map: the land as a projection of the mind. Hence, the ‘lost

homes' in Greenstein's words, are new homes which still have to be built on other (imaginative) foundations.

1.2: A Multi-Ethnic City: Montreal in Richler's Fiction

Mordecai Richler's fiction is deeply linked to his own hometown, namely Montreal, and in the course of this section I will explore to what extent and in which terms this city is present in the author's past and how it becomes the source of inspiration in his creative process. He has internalized the geography of the territory so much that his written production mirrors the Montreal ghetto and its well-known streets, and the characters and the atmosphere recreated in his novels are extremely similar to real people living in Montreal and to the environment of his own childhood and youth. For this reason it appears essential to study the geography of the territory, because Richler is definitely a local writer, namely a writer who employs his personal memories to the purpose of writing and the places of his youth as the setting of such writing. Woodcock expresses this concept very well:

Fiction, in so far as it is not gratuitous invention, is a distillation of subjective experience, rather than an objective reportage. But the way a writer portrays the settings in which he has lived does help understand the character of his work and his perceptions. And the fact that Richler's perceptions of Montreal, and especially of its Jewish society and the physical environment of Saint Urbain Street, are authentic as well as movingly expressed, not only shows us his real roots, but also tells us what kind of a novelist he is. (92)

Montreal assumes a special importance in Richler's life, even during his European years, to the point that he declared: "No matter how long I continue to live abroad, I do feel forever rooted in Montreal's St. Urbain Street. That was my time, my place, and I have elected myself to get it right" (Webb 19). Not only is he 'rooted' in Montreal, but he feels the responsibility to properly portray the Jewish ghetto: the autobiographical references are here more than a source of inspiration, and the existing places are accurately depicted as they

looked like in the past. Therefore, Richler sets out to recreate the reality he knows so well through his fictional writing. His ability of reinventing a place and its inhabitants is typical of the so called local writer. Moreover, Richler is also able to writing different novels using the same factual material, by reworking and focusing his attention each time on a different detail or employing a different viewpoint: for this reason, even though there is a certain number of similarities among his novels, there are always new considerations and new chances for Richler to discuss certain topics, since they are pretty vast and varied, and the material is rich.

Consequently, Montreal is not only a geographical reference point, but it is also a common cultural ground for a whole generation of post-World War II Jews residing on that land, thus sharing similar experiences and looking for their own identity. Montreal streets are both the starting and the returning point of the ‘Wandering Jew’(Greenstein) mentioned above, and the map of the city partially coincides with the map of Richler’s novels. The anxiety to leave finds in the need to come back a suitable conclusion for a running Jew in search of his own origins. Place and the sense of place is typical of Canadians and typical of the generations of Jews with an hyphenated identity, since their main question is actually “Which is our place in the world?”. For this reason, place can be considered from two viewpoints:

The first is place in the more usual meaning of the sights and sounds, smells and tastes, the textures of a place, the sensing of its natural landscape, its streets and buildings, its inhabitants. The second is place as category – of cultural identity, of the various filters through which we see and read actual, palpable place.

Canadians tend to be aware of categories, of hyphenated conditions. Founded by two imperial powers, situated between the two current superpowers: for us, such awareness

is natural enough. In our writing too, we are aware of categories, of how things get put together. (Cook 217)

Cook's considerations are consistent with what I have so far argued and with the purposes of my research in the following chapters: place, and also time, are important because they are interiorized in the novels' characters and they are expressions of their own personal conscience. In this case, the place of conscience (Cook) coincides with the map of the novel previously discussed, thus establishing a mutual relation between Richler's novels and the real places of his childhood. Place is thus an external reference, namely the geography of the territory, but also an internal space, very much linked to the concept of identity. For this reason, the theme of identity, is very dear to Canadians, and a huge number of Canadian writers deal with this issue. Some critics have recognized in this autoreferential talking and writing about their land a form of narcissism. As far as the Canadian written production is concerned, I reckon that the following statement is extremely illuminating:

More interesting and appropriate to the narcissistic dimensions of contemporary Canadian literature is Lacan's theory, which posits identification with others as the very basis of ego formation. In Lacan's complex philosophy, the human individual's greatest desire is to be recognized and identified, and this recognition develops in terms of a dialectic of lack and desire, a dialectic that moves out to adult object-relationships while simultaneously developing the sense of self [...] The contemporary world of Canadian literature is following such a dialectic. The post-colonial mentality is delighting in discovering the self and its history. (Staines 268)

Staines well expresses the dialogue between the incomplete self and the others, who are 'finished' and who represent the last stadium of the process of identity formation. It is precisely through this dialogue that the incomplete self might find a proper formation: for this

reason, talking about narcissism in negative terms, as in the Freudian theory, means limiting this necessity to explore the self which results in a deep self-analysis. Once again, Canadian literature appears as a useful means in this interesting investigation of one's personal identity through the Canadian land.

Mordecai Richler, differently from some of his compatriots, and due to the strong bond with Canada, employed most of his career as a professional writer in investigating the cultural background of his own country, and, despite the fact that his written production is far from being a historical reportage, the Canadian reality is present in his novels. His contribution is so important that he represents one of the few writers who recreated St. Urbain neighborhood so accurately that its inhabitants seem to come alive in his books. Richler has undoubtedly enriched the literary and cultural panorama of Canada: "Nations become small by their genius escaping them; great artists inevitably mature to refashion the cultural map of their day. Fortunately for Canada, Richler's imagination constantly returned to the "ghetto" of his native city, the clamorous, enclosed world of his childhood" (Vassanji 2).

Once again, the stress is on the concept of space, which is enclosed because the Jewish ghetto is a restricted area by definition, but also a fertile land for the author's imagination and a testing ground for the development of a personal identity. However, such enclosed space might be suffocating, as Richler soon experiences in his childhood. Coming from a very orthodox family, he rises up against the strict obedience to Jewish laws and he struggles with fixed roles: "Clearly in the above letter Mordecai acknowledges himself as a Richler, a member of the large clan among whom he grew up; and he demonstrates a fear of abandonment. Both factors are significant for someone struggling with, as we shall see, the question of Jewish identity and assimilation" (Vassanji 60).

Mordecai Richler writes the above-mentioned letter at the very beginning of his career when, far from home, he needs a financial backing for the publication of his first works. He experiences here (Vassanji 59) the fear of abandonment due to economic reasons, but he was not new to that fear: in fact, he had already confronted it when he was just a child and he refused to celebrate the Sabbath. This refusal cost him very much, since he was repudiated by his grandfather once for all. There are also some references to his own personal experiences in certain novels, such as *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, which cleverly portrays an unconventional and undisciplined protagonist. Richler, as well as Duddy, fights his personal struggle from within the Jewish community and openly deals with the problem of being integrated and assimilated into such strict community. He represents here a dissident, and also presents the nature of a hyphenated identity, even more so since he is an outsider of this community, hardly identifying with Orthodox Jews, like Richler.

The writer, while putting together his personal memories with real glimpses of the Montreal ghetto, recreates an organic map which is also the setting of most of his novels and which integrates different aspects of the everyday life in the community. Among Richler's publications, the book which probably best expresses the link with the Montreal ghetto is *The Street*; in Davidson's words: "There are two other points raised in *The Street* that must be briefly discussed. First, the book is a memoir of a certain place and time. The place is Montreal and more specifically the ghetto of Montreal. The time is the forties and more specifically the early forties and the years of World War II" (6-7). In this collection of short stories Richler gives birth to a variety of characters belonging to such streets; however, there are other important novels which well portray the Montreal ghetto, for instance *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *Son of a Smaller Hero*. In order to plunge into the Montreal ghetto reality, Richler skillfully and carefully describes the five most famous streets in his novels: St. Urbain, Clark, Waverley, Esplanade and Jeanne Mance, which were

enclosed by the Main and Park Avenue. However, the most important of all is definitely St. Urbain, a French name for Urban, which owes its name to the first pope named Urban who lived there (Richler, *The Street* 13).

As a matter of fact, Montreal is a city not only divided between the French-Canadian and the English-Canadian, but “It is divided between the Jews, who are poor, and the gentiles, who are not poor. To bridge the gap, it appears that the only path is that of material success” (Coles 81). Division and lack of integration are fundamental to describe the ghetto reality, not simply between Jews and Gentiles, but also among different ethnic groups, such as Italians, Yugoslavs and Ukrainians. The Main, which is another important street in Richler’s narration, was a pretty poor street, and it gave hospitality to above-mentioned ethnic groups, while the WASPs, which in Richler’s fiction are described as ‘dreaded’, lived above it, a bit far from the Main: therefore, there was a sort of watershed between the WASPs and all the others, who were ghettoized in the Main. The lack of integration could not but cause problems among the population, but according to the author the major problem was caused by the mutual intolerance between Jews and French Canadians: “Looking back, it’s easy to see that the real trouble was there was no dialogue between us and French Canadians, each elbowing the other, striving for WASP acceptance. We fought the French Canadians stereotype for stereotype” (Richler, *The Street* 53). The real enemies appeared to be the WASPs, who imposed their culture and the English language to the population, thus openly discriminating both Jews and French Canadian who initially struggled hard with the language. The WASPs seem to possess the land, as clearly emerges from the following excerpt:

‘Their country.’ How telling. And how far young Mordecai of St. Urbain Street had come when he wrote this, how far young Canada had come. Anti-Semitism might have existed at the street level, among the poor. But it was at the level of haughty

discrimination at public places such as the beaches, clubs, and restaurants that it stung. The Jewish insecurity and self-consciousness about their humble origins was not easily shaken off; as many would attest to this day, 'it never goes away.' This would be a recurrent theme in Richler's fiction, as indeed of other Jewish writers of his generation in Canada and the United States. (Vassanji 22-23)

Therefore, Jews, feeling unsuitable to live in such an intolerant atmosphere, strongly disregarded the WASPs, who were the only ethnic group truly hated by the majority of the population, which counted on a steadily growing number of immigrants. The territory seemed to belong to the WASPs, and this is the very first step of intolerance; many places were restricted to gentiles, as Richler explains in "Pinky's Squealer", an episode contained in *The Street*. If Jews, like many others already mentioned, did not possess the land, they were necessarily considered second-class citizens, and they economically depended on the 'owners'. Moreover, the possession of the land is especially dear to Jews, due to the numerous diasporas they were forced to experience.

A novel which successfully portrays the ghetto and the ghetto's mentality is *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*:

Although Richler had introduced the vernacular of St. Urbain previously, Duddy Kravitz is the novel in which it finds its full glory. The ghetto is given to us in its own language – the easy informality, the casual vulgarity, the Yiddish inflection, and above all the inventiveness and humour of an essentially oral culture. (Vassanji 107)

Once again the reader encounters the 'vulgarity' already mentioned by Gopnik (8). Everyday life and the limits of the Jewish community are at the very centre of the novel, thus highlighting a peripheral reality which, with all its faults and vulgar shamelessness, is finally well-accepted by the reader: in this way, St. Urbain becomes a common reality. The stylistic

aspect, which I will explore in the third part of my research, is also very much linked to the content of the novel. The pathos, the language, which sometimes is dialect, the funny dialogues, all these elements contribute to make familiar the St. Urbain neighborhood, and to plunge the reader into such a peripheral reality.

Another important novel which deals entirely with the Montreal ghetto is *Son of a Smaller Hero*: this novel is interesting also because its protagonist shares a certain number of similarities with Duddy Kravitz, such as the premature aging and the desperate need to look older. Noah Adler is experiencing an apprenticeship, and this apprenticeship takes place in the Montreal ghetto: “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” (Greenstein, *The Apprenticeship of Noah Adler* 47). Once again, the Montreal ghetto is the projection of the social dimension in the Jewish community and is a sort of litmus test of Noah’s desires and fears: the moment he leaves his oppressing family, he also leaves his ghetto, but this first departure will be followed by the separation from Miriam and the coming back to his family before a final leaving (Davidson). Similarly to the succession of seasons in the novels, the succession of leaving and coming back characterizes the complex relation of love-hate Noah has with his Jewish-Canadian origins.

St. Urbain Horseman is one of Richler’s masterpieces, and the temporal and spatial issue are here well developed: “Temporally, instead of Duddy’s frenetic running, Jake Hersh examines time from a more internalized perspective. Spatially, instead of Duddy’s limitations within Montreal’s parochial ghetto, Jake Hersh widens his horizons throughout the Diaspora” (Greenstein, *Third Solitudes* 149). It’s definitely a more mature novel, and the main goal of the protagonist is always the same: to feel liberated and regenerated after the departure from the Montreal periphery. However, after long years abroad, the moment of coming back

finally arrives and Jake Hersh experiences an epiphany: he discovers himself missing not simply the ghetto's streets and atmosphere, but also the cultural and moral values he thought he had lost in the old continent. He 'widens his horizons' and becomes an emigrate Jew, a condition Noah Adler has always dreamed of, but unfortunately he never feels at home in England, and he realizes the importance of his suburban origins only when he comes back to Montreal.

Mordecai Richler has vividly portrayed his neighborhood and the multiethnic reality typical of Montreal, which is not simply the setting of his novels, but a real presence which permeates his writing. In Vassanji's words: "No one had created Montreal, or any Canadian city, with this same immediacy" (88).

2. Identity in relation to Place and Time

2.1: Introducing the Question of Hyphenated Identities in Richler's Novels

The production of the novelist, satirist and essayist Mordecai Richler is particularly concerned with the issue of Jewish-Canadian hyphenated identities, to the point that he stands as one of the most eminent examples of Jewish-Canadian culture. In the attempt to grasp the essence of Richler's protagonists, two of whom will be at the centre of my analysis on the identity question, I will highlight to which extent they are expression of this specific example of hyphenated identity. There is a common ground among those protagonists, whose main features are the sense of disorientation, the fear of exclusion and the need to emerge from the 'cultural cringe' (Webb 8). The protagonists' hyphenated identity is always present in the novels, even though it is not openly manifest.

There are many reasons which have led me to choose Mordecai Richler and his production as the focus of my research: first of all, he gave a crucial contribution to the non-WASP literary panorama. Undoubtedly, he rejects labels and considers himself a writer first and foremost, but his contribution as a Jewish-Canadian author is here very important. In Chuck Samata's words:

Until Mordecai, WASP writers defined what English Canadian culture was. They reflected the intent of Canadian immigration policies, which were effectively, if casually, racist until after the Second World War. So you can see why Mordecai was more than a writer to me – he was the first literary voice of the non-WASP Canadian, and he provided many with a legitimacy previously denied. (Samata in qd Posner 228)

Thanks to Richler's voice, along with other important Jewish-Canadian writers, such as Leonard Cohen or A. M. Klein just to quote two of them, the great public has a clear inside view of the non-WASP Canadian, in this case Jewish. The fact that he spent many years in Europe, notably in Paris and London, did not uproot his original culture: on the contrary, he finds in the European context the suitable setting for some of his novels, still preserving Jewish-Canadians protagonists. Therefore, his voice is precious as a non-WASP writer, and, moreover, he was one of the most eminent writers in Canada, and his fame reached all Europe: the old continent is very much present in his novels and constituted a source of inspiration to him, particularly in his juvenile production. He spent many years in Europe, especially in London, but he always kept a very strong bond with his Canadian origins, which he asserted with pride.

On the contrary, he had a more complex relation with religion, since he showed an ambivalence of respect and mockery towards his Jewish origins: this ambivalence represents a distinctive feature of his written production as novelist as well as essayist and satirist. A central aspect in Richler's writing is the perpetual feeling of disorientation concerning personal identity, and this emerges in his characters as well. He attempts to find a clue in the complex process of searching a definition of hyphenated identity through the assimilation of Jewish and Canadian cultures. The search for identity is central to Richler, both as a person and as a writer. As Jason A. Soloway puts it, talking about Klein, Layton and Richler:

While all three authors struggle to come to terms with the tension created by their hyphenated identities, none of them resolve it; to do so would result in a loss of the fuel that feeds the intellectual, religious, and cultural tension that provides the stimulus for so much of their work. (94-95)

Tension is a key word here: it can be intended either in a negative way, namely the tension originated from the coexistence of two populations who do not tolerate their mutual presence, or in a positive way, as the meeting of those two peoples and the mingling of their cultures, which is precisely how Richler's production is to be envisaged. The result of this coexistence is definitely a source of inspiration for the writer, a 'fuel', because he can develop the implications of such double culture in the process of writing, but most of all he can express the feelings and cultural legacy of a minority in Canada. The case of Montreal is special in this sense, and I will show how the Jewish-Canadian minority plays a pretty important role in this context. Dealing with the Jewish tradition, the writer often manifests a sense of repulsion, which is also due to the strict observance of Jewish laws among some of his family's members. As a matter of fact, Mordecai and his brother Avrum felt a sort of repulsion toward Jewish orthodoxy, rather than feeling actively involved in it. In Avrum Richler's words:

So there were two people who were responsible for turning me away from my religion, my grandfather and my mother. I am certain that they were also the cause of Mordecai's black-sheep status. They were both people who hated with a vengeance. Both were untruthful. Both were adept at bending the rules to suit themselves. And both were very orthodox Jews. (Posner 22)

Interestingly enough, Mordecai Richler experienced in the first person the sense of exclusion from his more orthodox Jewish familiars, because he disobeyed to his grandfather when he was a young boy, and because later on he married a shiksa³. The episode concerning his grandfather is remembered by Richler with a hint of sorrow, since he was even prevented from attending his funeral for his inadequate behavior according to Jewish canons. This sense

³ A non-Jewish woman

of exclusion, especially from the Jewish community, appears as a recurrent theme in many of his novels. As a matter of fact, in spite of his religious education, Richler has often criticized the Jewish orthodoxy and the Jewish community, notably in the novel *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. Duddy, the protagonist of the novel, shares some points in common with the writer: first of all, the wish to rebel against strict rules and a witty and sharp-tongued character.

The feeling of both belonging and rejecting the Jewish community regularly appears in Richler's novels, thus proposing again and again the issue of exclusion. The publication of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* caused a harsh criticism from the orthodox members of the Jewish community, because Richler attempts to question, but also to make fun of, some aspects of religious orthodoxy, which he knew pretty well due to his familiar environment. Duddy is not a noble character, far from it: he destroys whatever stands between him and his goal, and despite his young age he soon turns into a scruple less businessman, who deals with illicit commerce. Nevertheless, he is sometimes able to show gratitude and even be very caring toward some of his familiars.

Richler, instead of choosing a noble example of Jew, offered to the audience a young and inexperienced but already corrupted human being; moreover, he does not show any interest in behaving correctly and demonstrates to be an outsider to the Jewish community. Duddy is not a pure character but it is not wholly bad: this is the reason why the reader is more likely to rejoice for his successes than for his failures. Most of all, the moral judgment is completely absent in the novel, as Richler shows in an interview:

The moral idea behind Duddy was to get inside and show how sympathetic in many ways the go-getter, the guy nobody has time for... really is. That's why I was so happy

when [American critic Alfred] Kazin said ‘but he has also avoided the obvious device of making his protagonist contemptible.’ This was crucial to me. (Posner 125)

Therefore, Richler insists on representing a highly objectionable Jew ‘on the make’, but deprived of the load of moralism: he depicts what he sees, the good as well as the bad sides of the protagonist, however numerous they are. Apprenticeship, which is the underpinning of the whole story, is a special occasion of growth within the Jewish community, and represents the fundamental passage from youth to adulthood. Since the image of the Jew which emerges from the text is not at all a brilliant one, some members of the Montreal Jewish community moved an accusation of anti-Semitism to the author, as he laments in another interview:

The only people who would consider this bk. Anti-Semitic... are those Jews who are very frightened. I don't consider myself a Jewish or a Canadian writer. I am a writer. I'm not interested in the fact that Jews can't get into certain hotels or golf courses. I'm interested in Jews as individual persons – and I'm not writing a Jewish problem book. Briefly, you can put it this way: I think those who were murdered at Dachau should not be mourned as Jews, but as men. (The distinction, I think, is important). I don't believe there is any such thing as a Jewish outlook or a Jewish Problem or Jewish Spokesman. Each man has his own problem (part of that, of course, might be his being a Jew). (Posner 87)

I reckon that there are two important elements raised by the author in this interview which need to be examined more in depth. First of all, the refusal of labels: he refuses to be reduced to a Jewish or a Canadian writer. During his career, Richler decided to publish his novels first in the US and England and only later in Canada, in order to challenge himself on a higher grade and not to be considered *the* Canadian writer: in fact, in spite of the issues he

might be dealing with, he expects to be considered a writer just like others. The refusal of a definition also means he hopes and claims to be considered equal to the others, as a writer and as a man. For instance, he expects that the reader has no additional expectations because his characters are Jews and Canadians. Secondly, Richler refuses to stand as a pillar of his community, and he refuses any salvific aim attributed to his work. He simply depicts the world which is familiar to him, with all its faults and all its imperfect individuals.

For this reason, his novels are not to be considered examples of political or social commitment, even though, in his written production, Richler also wrote political pamphlets such as *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec! Requiem for a Divided Country*, which demonstrates a special political and social involvement. Furthermore, he kept a certain distance from the Jewish community, as seen above: he wishes to write freely about ‘Canadian’ and ‘Jewish’ topics: it is thanks to the refusal of strict labels and definitions that the writer gives his work a dignity independently from the matter discussed.

Therefore, Richler is neither a Canadian chauvinist, nor he is ashamed of his Canadian origins. On the contrary, behind a façade of mockery, he often displays a distinguishable pride for his origins, as it can be noticed in the following excerpt taken from *This Year in Jerusalem*:

I was raised to proffer apologies because my ostensibly boring country was so short of history, but now, after five weeks in a land chocked by the clinging vines of its past, a victim of its contrary mythologies, I considered the watery soup of my Canadian provenance as a blessing. After travelling through the Rockies, Rupert Brooke had complained that he missed “the voices of the dead.” Me, I was grateful at last for their absence. (238)

He definitely considers himself a Canadian Jew, and did not make aliyah, even though he planned to do that together with other friends when he was younger, as he confesses in this autobiographical excerpt. The so-called ‘watery soup’ of his provenance is the ‘fuel’ Soloway referred to: it is through the process of questioning the characters’ identity that the tension is developed and the engine of fiction is triggered. Richler is perfectly conscious of dealing with delicate topics, so he dispels the tension as much as possible through mockery and irony, in a quite provocative way which I will examine in the final subchapter.

What Mordecai Richler seems to be mainly dealing with throughout his written production, despite the fact that it evolved quite significantly in the course of his career, is the raising of Jews from the ghetto, which clearly has an historical implication, as suggested by Michael Posner:

The creation of the state of Israel and the Holocaust created a different view. The Jews were now people. And Mordecai grew up in this generation, where to be a Jew was to be a second-class citizen, and therefore he had to prove something. So he wrote about these emerging Jewish characters in a society that was finally allowing the Jew to create something for himself and was reaching a level that could not have been achieved. (38-39)

Even though I agree with the concept of ‘emerging Jews’, which is very much present in Richler’s novels, I do not believe that ‘he had to prove something’. On the contrary, also due to the considerations above, he seems to be rather expressing the feelings of this post-war generation of Jews. Obviously, he is historically conscious of the importance the birth of Israel had for the Jewish community worldwide, and he especially tackles this issue and his own feelings concerning it in *This Year in Jerusalem*, where he reports his adventurous two trips to Israel; however, there is no wish of redeeming the figure of the Jew, as his

protagonists' evident flaws prove. Richler is very much interested in human variety, faults included, and he represents it without conventions and without indulgence. The emerging Jew is a variation of the 'Wandering Jew' cited by Greenstein:

This running motif represents an accelerated version or parody of the Wandering Jew who must "make it" in a hurry in a newly found land of opportunity, who yearns for a speedy transition from immigrant margins to mainstream status. Denied recognition by New York's cultural yeshiva and by London's imperial hum and buzz, Richler's Jewish-Canadian anti-heroic sons of immigrants emerge from a double ghetto to avenge lost time and a lost place by trespassing on foreign landscapes and histories.

(142)

The so called running motif is nowhere better expressed than in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, where the protagonist is obsessed with time and success: he is a Jew on the make who must 'make it', and his means of success is the acquisition of land. In Greenstein's excerpt the importance of achieving a social identification, evolving from the immigrant position is also stressed. The anxiety of succeeding is definitely a typical feature in Richler's production: Canada appears to be truly a land of possibilities, like the American soil for the early immigrants. Richler's protagonists are often haunted by the need to escape their own origins and demonstrate their talent through personal but mostly economic success. In the text of the novel, the protagonist often appears comically rather than tragically depicted: the 'Wandering Jew' is thus presented in a parody, but he also shows human qualities and faults which are shared by the reader as well. In a few words, he is more natural and more human, but also has unpleasant characteristics which make him become a anti-hero, a concept which I will extensively deal with in the third chapter. It is particularly interesting here the use of 'lost' time and 'lost' place: in an attempt to revenge a 'lost' origin of peregrination, the post-

modern Canadian Jew is investing all his energies in capitalizing time and extending his power, also geographically as in the case of Duddy Kravitz.

The issue of emergence is strictly linked to the concept of ghetto, which is very much present in Richler's entire written production, in satires, novels or newspaper articles. He once declared: "To be a Jew and Canadian is to emerge from the ghetto twice" (Richler, *Hunting Tigers Under Glass* 9). The ghetto dimension is exactly what the protagonists of the novels try to escape, by traveling far away, as in the case of Barney Panofsky (*Barney's Version*), or by elevating their social status, as in the case of Duddy Kravitz. However, the ghetto is also the natural environment of such characters, who emerge from the condition of being Jews and from being Canadians: they carry with them the legacy of their origins, in terms of culture, religion and social status.

The ghetto dimension, which is both a sufficient reason for the protagonists to initially escape and a good reason to come back in a second moment. Adam Gopnik refers to the ghetto as Richler's source of inspiration, the ingredient giving him a certain 'provincial narrowness' (qtd in Webb 9). Richler definitely digs in his juvenile memories to find the suitable setting for his own characters, and he belongs to the so-called 'local novelists', as I will further explore in the following chapter. He maintains a conflicting relationship with his 'provincialism': on the one side, he attempts to escape from it, and to be free from his Montreal neighborhood. However, on the other hand, the people and streets of his quarter are haunting presences in his texts, and the more he tries to forget them, the more he is inevitably and unaccountably pushed to tell their stories again and again. Very little is wasted of his 'Jewishness' or 'Canadianness', as the following excerpts shows:

One can, reasonably, divide novelists into the inventors and the well-diggers. If the wells are deep enough, there is no doubt they can produce fine novels, when experience

has been subjected to all the tricks that memory and artifice can play; Proust is there as the splendid witness. On the other hand, the well-diggers are seldom capable of creating the new worlds, seemingly detached from their own lives, that the inventors can offer. The difference is of kind, not of quality. (Woodcock 93)

The reader is involved in a new world, and feels in touch with the protagonists of Richler's novels, some of whom are well-known to the international audience: he is finally able to find a connection between the specific reality of Montreal and his vast public, for a great majority constituted by European and US readers. In a few words, Richler finds in his own life experiences the material for his stories, even if a considerable change has occurred from his juvenile to his mature production. The theme of the emerging Jew from the Montreal ghetto is the fil rouge of Richler's entire written production, and it is specific of Jewish-Canadian identities. This is especially evident in the case of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, since Duddy might stand as a clear example of 'emerging Jew', the Jew on the make already cited:

At night, lying exhausted on his cot, Duddy realized how little money he had in big business terms and he dreamed about his future. He knew what he wanted, and that was to own his own and to be rich, a somebody, but he was not sure of the smartest way to go about it. He was confident. But there had been others comers before him. South Africa, for instance, could no longer be discovered. It had been found. Toni Home Permanent had been invented. Another guy had already thought up Kleenex. But there was something out there, like let's say the atom bomb formula before it had been discovered, and Duddy dreamed that he would find it and make it fortune. He had his heroes. There was the stranger who had walked into the Coca Cola Company before it had made its name and said, "I'll write down two words on a piece of paper, and if you use my idea I want a partnership in the company." The two words were "Bottle it."

Don't forget, either, the man who saved that salmon company from bankruptcy with the slogan, this salmon is guaranteed not to turn pink in the can. There was the founder of the Reader's Digest – he'd made his pile too. The man who thought up the supermarket must have been another shnook of a small grocer one. There was a day when even the Boy Wonder gathered and sold streetcar transfers. Sure, everyone had to make a start, but it was getting late. Duddy was already seventeen and a half and sure as hell he didn't want to wait on tables for the rest of his life. He needed a stake. When he got back to Montreal in the autumn he would speak to his father and go to see the Boy Wonder. (Richler, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* 72-73)

Through this excerpt, beside Richler's typical irony, it appears clear the protagonist's hurry to emerge from Montreal's narrowness and become rich at any cost and through any discovery or invention. The case of Barney Panofsky (*Barney's Version*) is rather different, since I reckon he is an example of "emerged Jew": coming from St. Urbain Street, he goes to Paris looking for fortune and starts a commerce exchanging food products between Europe and Canada. He then came back to Montreal where he found the Totally Unnecessary Production, a TV-series company which gave him the success and money he was looking for. The following excerpt is taken from the second part of the novel, and the image of an accomplished businessman is evident:

Four years had passed, and I had graduated from dealing in cheese, olive oil, antiquated DC-3s, and stolen Egyptian artifacts, but was still brooding about Clara, guilt-ridden one day, defiant the next. I went and bought myself a house in the Montreal suburb of Hampstead. It was perfection. Replete with living-room conversation pit, fieldstone fireplace, eye-level kitchen oven, indirect lighting, air-conditioning, heated toilet seats and towel racks, basement wet bar, aluminium siding, attached two-car garage, and living-room picture window. Admiring the acquisition from the outside, satisfied that it

would make Clara spin in her grave, I saw what was wrong, and immediately went out and bought a basketball net and screwed it into place over the garage double-doors[...] Then I set out in quest of the missing piece in my spiteful middle-class equation, the jewel in reb Panofsky's crowns, so to speak. After all, it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. Yes. But, in order to acquire Mrs. Right, I had first of all to prove a straight arrow. (184-185)

Barney is definitely an 'emerged Jew', an old businessman who recalls his past of faults and successes in his autobiography. There is only one problem: he is affected by Alzheimer disease, so he very likely recounts past episodes confusedly, and often adjusts his memories operating either cuttings or additions depending on the situation, without being aware of that. As a consequence, we do not know the protagonist's real past: the theme of identity is here approached from a different viewpoint, namely the questionable reliability of such identity. The writer manipulates the whole story again and again on purpose, and asks the reader to follow him in his retelling, thus demanding the reader to trust him. If in the case of Duddy the pieces of information are provided without chances to question them, here the reader is asked to forgive some lacks of memory and to trust *Barney's Version* of facts, notably his innocence concerning the apparent death of his best friend Boogie. In this sense, the image of the 'emerged Jew' should be revised and may be interpreted differently: Barney has not completely 'emerged' from his past and the haunting presence of Boogie is still very much felt. Many critics have identified the protagonist with the writer himself, due to a number of analogies concerning his life, but he answers to this in an interview: "It's the only novel I've written in the first person so obviously a number of people are going to take it to be autobiographical, which is not the case. I was Barney Panofsky when I was writing it, but not before and not after" (Posner 303).

2.2: “A Jew belongs where he is”: Duddy and the Strong Bond with his own Land

2.2.1 Land as a Means to explore Identity

The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz is considered Richler’s first masterpiece and it is an extremely important novel not only among the writer’s works, but also in the whole Canadian panorama, due to its original and provocative content. Quite ordinary as far as the style is concerned, the novel well expresses the apprenticeship of a young Jew ‘on the make’ through trials and errors: Duddy is a clear example of an ‘emerging’ Jew, and his identity is very much linked to his land:

Totally individual, entirely universal, as a character he represents the emergence of literature, shaking free its integuments of derivation, out of life. Duddy could not have existed without St. Urbain’s Street to give him an origin and to harbor him as he developed; he emerged from the life of the street, his emergence is also metamorphosis, and if Duddy starts off in the world of the ordinary as a squalid and bloody-minded schoolboy, he soon changes into a being apart whose obsessive vitality shows literature outpacing the life in which it originates. (Woodcock 33)

Duddy is not simply an ‘emerging’ Jew harboring a dream of success, he is also an outcast: he was rejected both from his family and from school for his deplorable behavior, so he desperately needs to demonstrate his determination and capacity. He was considered responsible for the death of his teacher’s wife, Mrs. MacPherson, and he has always behaved as a rascal at school; his mother died when he was very young and his father seems to be exclusively concerned about his brother’s career as a future doctor. The only one who seems to believe in him is his grandfather, Simcha, and Duddy is determined to make him proud of himself. The acquisition of a land stands from the very beginning as the only means for Duddy to gain his grandfather’s consideration and carve a new identity for himself, away

from his condition of outcast, since he repeats as a refrain “A man without a land is nobody”(37). The solution presents itself when Yvette, his girlfriend, shows him a plat by the lake Sainte-Agathe-des-Monts, Québec, and he immediately starts dreaming of possessing that land. The Montreal ghetto is also very much present in the novel, to the point that Duddy seems to be a part of St. Urbain Street, and brings his origins with him in his process of emancipation and apprenticeship, which is the focus of the novel.

The issue of land acquisition, Duddy’s obsession, has historical as well as economic and social implications, and they all deal with the question of identity. For instance, from an historical viewpoint, land means emancipation and rootedness for the Jewish people, who are notoriously emigrants. Furthermore, after the creation of the State of Israel, the feeling of belonging or not to that land is crucial in distinguishing the Diaspora⁴ Jews from the Israeli Jews. The majority of the Jewish population is not living in the State of Israel, and they are deeply attached to their native country, like Richler:

To Richler, who believes that a Jew belongs where he is, like any other man, and who sees his loyalties as North American rather than Middle Eastern, the attempt of the Jews to see themselves as culturally separate from their neighbours is as futile as it is for Canadians to see themselves outside the general North American culture. (Woodcock 55)

Woodcock well expresses Richler’s belief that Jewish people who have grown up on the Canadian soil do belong to their Canadian homeland and have there their roots. For instance, he considers himself a Montrealer, and his Jewish culture and legacy is not to be

⁴ With the term Diaspora we mean living outside the state of Israel

perceived as an independent and conflicting aspect of his Canadian origin: on the contrary, his identity results in being enriched by the meeting of those two cultures:

Richler's liberal sensibilities are constantly challenged while in Israel as he repeatedly confronts those who propose a single identity for all Jews. He believes that he can be both Jewish and Canadian. He does not believe that he has to choose one over the other. In a review of Richler's work, Morton Ritts comments that 'Richler asserts he needs neither to live in Israel to be a Jew, nor to deny his ancestral culture to be a Canadian.' (Woodcock 88)

Richler is also persuaded, as he declared in an interview, that life in Israel is not different from life in the Diaspora. A geographical proximity to the land sacred to Jews is not necessarily a way to feel or behave in accordance to the Jewish laws, so, once again, living in Canada does not mean repudiating the Jewish religion. As we have seen, Richler's novels often take place in the city of Montreal. The Canadian land is homeland to many of his protagonists and Duddy is not an exception: the land appears as an instrument to retrace the protagonist's past, but also to discover the protagonist's future, and Duddy finds in the possession of a piece of land the means to find his own identity, and vice versa he explores his identity thanks to his origins:

However, Richler's Duddy became, not simply a Jew encountering specific setbacks and difficulties, but, more than that, a microcosm of the young man agonizingly seeking his identity and his place in society. (Coles 10)

Furthermore, from a psychoanalytical viewpoint, Duddy's desire to acquire a land can be due to the need to recover from his mother's loss. As a matter of fact, land stands for economic but also affective safety: "To compensate for the mother missing in his life, Duddy

turns to the land, an illusory Mother Earth, for a sense of security and rootedness” (Greenstein 147).

However, when Duddy finally reaches the material success he longed so much for, instead of finding his place in society and of being highly esteemed by his family and friends, he experiences a sort of alienation: he is alienated by his extremely demanding job, and alienated in the sense of abandoned by the people surrounding him due to his attitude. In fact, his rush to success has several drawbacks, to the point that even his girlfriend Yvette, who has always supported him in his business and is depicted as a nurse-like figure, finally leaves him due to his deplorable behaviour. Duddy is an outcast at the beginning of the novel and an alienated person by the end of it: blinded by the modern syndrome of making easy money, his apprenticeship finally fails.

2.2.2 *The Apprenticeship does not evolve*

The aim of the apprenticeship is precisely to evolve from an initial condition to a maturer one, in the case of Duddy from a Pusherke to an adult man, and Richler has the chance to present an uncommon apprenticeship, different from the readers' expectations: instead of a shy and talented protagonist, we face a social climber without scruples. However, something goes wrong in the process: not only Duddy's deeds cause pains to all the people standing around him, but the same good intentions which pushed him to purchase the land fade, and are the cause of Duddy's transformation into a mean and opportunistic person. If the land is the instrument through which he is finally able to reach a respectable social position and forge a new identity, his longing for success is also responsible for turning him into a dishonest man: in this sense the apprenticeship is ruinous. Something has been lost on the path and his success necessarily has a bitter taste. Interestingly enough, he ends by being an outcast, as he was before his apprenticeship:

His triumph, and his tragedy, is that his final, material success equally endears him to and alienates him from the family from which he was half-alienated all along. (Coles 84)

Certainly, his father is proud of him as he never was, but the rest of his family does not support him: in particular, Duddy does not deserve the approval of his grandfather, who is pushed to see only Duddy's illicit deals. In fact, Duddy's girlfriend Yvette is so hurt by Duddy's behaviour that she decides to disclose his secrets to Simcha, especially how Duddy forced Virgil to give him money. As a modern Jay Gatsby, Duddy operates on credit, differently from his family: while his grandfather, whom he deeply esteems, has worked hard all his life to sustain his family, Duddy runs fast toward success and is able to acquire a third of the whole territory surrounding the lake Sainte Agathe des Monts in just six months. Duddy is involuntarily much closer to his uncle Benji, an accomplished businessman now on decline, than to his grandfather Simcha, who stands for the moral values which are finally forgotten. The Pusherke has the possibility to choose between the first and the second category and automatically goes toward the 'easy money':

What we see – and what Duddy clearly sees – is that by the very fact of acquiring land he has achieved a metamorphosis. He has been raised by that one act from the class who pay cash and struggle hard to get it, to that of those who operate on credit. Like his Uncle Benji he has made the leap from the realm of the workers to that of the proprietors. (Woodcock 44)

Therefore, one main cause of Duddy's failure is his incontrollable and consuming longing for success: he has totally interiorized market laws and experiences an alienation from his family and his friends. The question of identity comes again to the surface the moment Duddy is forced to choose between his two souls, namely the genuine side and the

rotten side. Nevertheless, Duddy was given the chance to choose between them: he was warned by his uncle Benji, who pushed him toward the honest path:

There's more to you than mere money-lust, Duddy, but I'm afraid for you. You're two people, that's why. The scheming little bastard I saw so easily and the fine, intelligent boy underneath that your grandfather, bless him, saw. But you're coming of age soon and you'll have to choose. A boy can be two, three, four potential people, but a man is only one. He murders the others. (280)

The issue of murdering a part of one's self in order to become an adult and a mature man is central: Duddy's double identity that the reader sees at the beginning of the narration has evolved into a single identity by the end of it, but, unfortunately for Duddy, at the price of corruption. Duddy's task is far from being easy, because he is aware that he is defining not simply his present, but also his future: he is 'coming of age soon' and must demonstrate his talent through his apprenticeship. However, despite the crude picture of the protagonist given to the reader, the author does not provide a moral judgment: he presents a character possibly too young to understand how bad his deeds are, and which consequences those deeds have:

I DON'T THINK OF HIM AS FUNDAMENTALLY UNSYMPATHETIC. And yet there are readers, they're mostly Jewish, that find him... it looks like I've failed in connecting with them, probably because of the baggage they bring to the book. But he is supposed to end up, in spite of all the ruthless and rotten things he's done, so that you think, well, yes, this is another human being. (Gibson 292)

In this excerpt from an interview, Richler highlights two main aspects: on the one hand the heavy 'baggage' of expectation the reader has concerning the protagonist, and how such expectations are totally neglected. On the other hand, the reader is fundamentally facing a human being with his faults: the stress is put on humanity and verisimilitude. Richler plays

with the audience's expectations and shows them an unconventional protagonist. Another possible interpretation, always explored in the same interview, is how Duddy can represent an example of innocence brutalized: as a matter of fact, what the reader perceives is the evolution of an innocent and hopeful Jewish boy to an unscrupulous enriched dealer. In this sense, all the positive aura which the term apprenticeship evokes takes on a new meaning, and what Richler represents here is once again reality deprived of good appearances.

There is another fundamental reason why Duddy's apprenticeship does not succeed: he is not able to meet his grandfather's expectation simply because his grandfather does not expect to actually receive an area of land. Simcha has always dreamed to possess a plot, but this is a sort of chimera that fades away as soon as it turns into reality. As a matter of fact, Mr. Dingleman, Duddy's hatred rival in the purchase of the land, demonstrates to be far-sighted:

"Certainly not," Dingleman continued. "But if you had you'd know about those old men. Sitting in their dark cramped ghetto corners they wrote the most mawkish, school-girlish stuff about green fields and sky. Terrible poetry, but touching when you consider the circumstances under which it was written. Your grandfather doesn't want any land. He wouldn't know what to do with it." (322)

Those old Jews are dreaming about something which does not exist: it is a dream passed on from generation to generation, and gradually charged with an amplified meaning. The land represents success by definition, as if it was the only and true solution to emancipation and happiness: in other words, the key to emerge from the ghetto. Once again, Duddy's mercantile mentality clashes against the abstract world of values of his grandfather. Therefore, the apprenticeship cannot work because the goal itself was not even contemplated

by Simcha, and once Duddy turns it into reality, the surprise is so big that his family is disoriented. On the contrary, Duddy is not aware of it, as he happily runs on his land:

Duddy bolted out of the store. He did not pause to look into the car, but hurried past it and around the block. He began to run. The land is yours, he thought, and nothing they do or say or feel can take it away from you. You pay a price. (325)

Completely blinded by his personal achievement, Duddy shows an exaggerated happiness. We find here another important aspect of his personality, namely his obsessive vitality: in many descriptions he is depicted as always running or jumping, he seems to be even unable to walk. What the reader clearly perceives is an exaggerated anxiety to demonstrate to other people his merit, but the healthy wish of a young boy to explore and plunge in new challenges which are offered to him turns into a frenzied rush whose violence destroys what is around him. In this sense, his vitality is 'sick', since it is a centripetal force which draws but also damages whatever is close to Duddy. Richler is anticipating the modern age characterized by frenzied rhythms and fixed schedules: we can see glimpses of the rat-race in Duddy's life. For this reason, he can represent the bewilderment of the modern man plunged in a constantly challenging reality, which forces him to rush things: the generational clash between Duddy and Simcha now appears even more evident. Moreover, in this last words Duddy is finally aware of what he lost, as he explicitly speaks about a 'price': always in his mercantile mentality, in order to reach a goal you have to let something else aside, in his case the price of his success is his grandfather's disapproval.

In the novel, Duddy is often complaining about the fact that he is ignored by his family, and he tries to get attentions sometimes acting in an aggressive way, as he does with Yvette or Virgil for instance. Furthermore, he experiences contempt also by cultivated and wealthy people who, according to him, limit themselves to superficial judgments :

You lousy, intelligent people! You lying sons of bitches with your books and your socialism and your sneers. You give me one long pain in the ass. You think I never read a book? I've read books. I've got friends who read them by the ton. A big deal. What's so special in them? They all make fun of guys like me. Pusherkes. What a bunch you are! What a pack of crap-artists! Writing and reading books that make fun of people like me. Guys who want to get somewhere. If you're so concerned, how come in real life you never have time for me? (247)

Duddy's rage is evident, he demands a social revenge: he demands to be taken into consideration for his personal achievements and reckons it is too easy for those cultivated people to judge young guys like him without money, while they hide behind an ostentatious knowledge. Duddy's viewpoint, the viewpoint of a minority often disregarded, is finally taken into consideration by Richler, but that does not prevent him from depicting a fundamentally shadowy character:

In short, it is hard to get a "fix" on Duddy. Which is precisely Richler's point: the stereotyped, the despised pusherke, has his own story to tell, but, as Duddy laments: "Nobody's ever interested in my side of the story." Richler is. (Davidson 83)

Richler demonstrates here his ability as a writer to present his characters without silencing them: on the contrary, he expressly wants to give them space, especially highlighting the hard path toward maturity and toward a definition of identity. Richler is truly interested in Duddy's side of the story; however, it is hard to 'get a fix' on him because he changes throughout the novel, he experiences a metamorphosis, which leads to complete his apprenticeship.

2.2.3 From a 'then' Apprenticeship to a 'now' Fulfilment

The issue of time in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* is important as well: Duddy is incessantly fighting against the passing of time, since he wants to become an adult as soon as possible: “Duddy Kravitz was a small, narrow-chested boy of fifteen with a thin face. His black eyes were ringed with dark circles and his pale, bony cheeks were criss-crossed with scratches as he shaved twice daily in his attempt to encourage a beard” (4).

Duddy begins working at the age of thirteen years old, and he never stops to pause from that moment on. Even his physical appearance mirrors his desire to grow up, to the point that he shaves twice a day and sacrifices his rest: he is entirely devoted to his job. Duddy often appears out of focus: his incessant activity does not allow the reader to entirely grasp his character. However, he does not seem to be able to control time, quite the opposite: he seems not to have enough. Duddy is a fugitive, he is even ‘escaping’ from his own childhood:

What makes Duddy run? His grandfather’s phrase, “a man without land is nobody,” acts as a catalyst for his quest to possess land and self. Since his apprenticeship must be as short-lived as possible, Duddy never has the opportunity to experience childhood in his rush toward becoming an adult. At fifteen he already has dark circles around his eyes and shaves twice a day to encourage a beard; time becomes an obsession for the chain-smoker who holds down several jobs: “ideas are ticking over like bombs in his head. Tick-tock, tick-tock” (Greenstein 146)

The feeling conveyed is of extreme anxiety and uncomfortable lifestyle. Ideas are like bombs, ready to explode at any moment, so the protagonist must realize his dreams

before it's too late. Duddy feels the pressure of both present and future: his dreams feed his hopes and motivate his rush. His inhuman rhythms of work are here presented:

Time became an obsession with him and he was soon trying to do two and even three things at once. He kept self-improvement books beside him in the car to glance at when he stopped for a red light. He did exercises while he listened to his records and in bed with Yvette he memorized stuff from *How to increase Your Word Power* while she went on and on about a scary but horny dream she had had or some dumb story about her childhood. (232)

Duddy never stops, and he forces himself into self-improvement: he is the true engine which triggers the plot; for instance, Mr. Calder, an extremely wealthy businessman whom the protagonist meets enjoys Duddy's company for his funny stories and his incessant dynamism. There is no better image of him than the one provided in the previous quotation: he does not seem to suffer physical and mental strain, because his goal is too ambitious for him to give up.

Mr. MacPherson, Duddy's discredited teacher, proves to be judicious in his words: they stand as an admonition for Duddy and they will turn to be true: "You'll go far, Kravitz. You're going to go very far." (36) He actually goes far, also from a moral viewpoint, but the question is 'at which price?', or, in Ann-Marie MacDonald's words, "How much dirt is too much?" (Richler, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* IX). Here there is another interpretation of the reasons which lead to the failure of Duddy's apprenticeship:

Can ideals coexist, the novel asks, with fantasies that necessarily run counter to those very ideals? This question particularly applies to Simcha and Yvette. How different is Simcha's vision of ownership from Duddy's? But the same question also has a larger and more general application. Whether it is labeled the American Dream, the Canadian

Dream, or the Jewish Dream, Simcha and Yvette still envision their own version of the dream that drives Duddy, the same old dream of liberation through ownership, of mystical fulfillment through essentially material means. Jay Gatsby learned in 1922 that that equation does not work. Richler, in 1959, shows why it cannot, how the dream is always premised on a split in reality and a confusion of ends and means. (Davidson 92-93)

Duddy hopes to free himself through the chimera of owning a land, but he commits a mistake: he mingles dream and reality, ends and means. Similarly to Jay Gatsby, Duddy is fed by the reverie of stopping time at his advantage, and to ennobling his illegal deeds due to his lofty plan. Success fades finally, and Duddy looks much more like Mr. Cohen, a Jewish businessman accused of homicide, and like the Boy Wonder, a well-known dope smuggler and pimp, than like his grandfather whom he desperately wants to please.

What is in progress in this novel, is accomplished in *Barney's Version*, thus motivating Duddy's apprenticeship and moving to a more mature production. Richler's protagonists are linked by a thin line, as if Barney was on the other side of the corner: "Mounted on their hobbyhorses, these Jewish-Canadian rakes and rogues cross borders from a "then" apprenticeship to a "now" fulfillment, from a grudging smile to full-blown laughter" (Greenstein 160).

What Duddy dares to do has already been brought to an end by Barney in a process of transformation and evolution: therefore, the identities of Richler's protagonists find their place and space on an ideal timeline, one being the evolution of the other.

2.3: “I tried my very best to escape”: Barney and the Need to leave

2.3.1 *Barney's Escape*

In the course of this section I will explore a major issue of this dissertation, namely the constant tension in Richler's novels between the protagonists' need to leave and the final coming back to origins. This tension, which finds its roots in the themes we have already touched upon is here analyzed more in depth. Through a reading of *Barney's Version*, I will deal with the juvenile experiences of the protagonist who, after having spent a long time abroad in Europe, comes back to his Canada and to his Montreal: his hyphenated identity of Jew and Canadian will be tackled. A final part is destined to the mysterious identity of the protagonist and to the role the word 'version' plays in the novel.

The fictitious pretext which triggers the plot and moves the protagonist, Barney Panofsky, to write his autobiography is explicit: “To recap. This sorry attempt at autobiography, triggered by Terry McIver's calumnies, is being written in the dim hope that Miriam, reading these pages, will be overwhelmed by guilt” (52). Miriam is Barney's third wife and only true love, but she left him because he turned out to have been once unfaithful to her, while Terry McIver is a former friend who then publicly accused Barney of murdering Boogie, a dear friend of Barney.

The whole plot of the novel is divided into three parts corresponding to three temporal intervals: the protagonist's three marriages with the neurotic Clara first, the garrulous second Miss Panofsky then, and finally his greatest true love, Miriam. While the first part takes place in Paris, during the protagonist's cheerful youthful years, the second and third part take place in Montreal, where Barney was born and returns to after his European sojourn.

The first part of the novel, simply entitled ‘Clara 1950-1952’, represents Barney's attempt to free himself from family and traditions and start a new life far away: in Webb's

words he “tried his very best to escape” (72). The ‘Paris period’, as it is often referred to in the text, represents a moment of total giddiness in terms of culture, identity and dreams for the young characters in their twenties: the bohemian lifestyle deeply influenced Barney as well as his friends Cedric, Boogie, Leo, Terry and Yossel, and of course Clara. This group of supposedly talented writers and painters leads a messy life made of frequent walks in Saint Germain des Prés or long chats and philosophical debates in charming cafes such as the ‘Mabillon’. Barney’s escapist dream turns into reality: the young expatriate is seeking his fortune among a group of expatriates, coming both from the US and Canada, who are part of the so-called lost generation. This term here stands for a group of young emigrants who search in the City of Light of the ‘50s what they could not find at home: inspiration, success and fame. The case of the protagonist is rather different, since he is not a writer nor a painter: in fact, thanks to Yossel Pinsky, a Jew who survived Auschwitz, Barney is introduced in the market of import-exports, where his entrepreneurial abilities become evident.

This first part is not simply about the protagonist’s crazy years of freedom: the issue of Jewish religion is here very much present, and it is deeply linked to his first wife, Clara, and to her haunting past. When she was just a child, she tried to rebel against his family’s Jewish Orthodoxy only to receive therapies of unprecedented violence, and she, more than anyone else in the novel, represents the desperate need to escape. A few months after the wedding, Clara is found dead by Barney in their apartment, but her father shows no emotion for the loss of his daughter: on the contrary, he carelessly recollects her past of misfortune with a clear mind:

It got to be too much. Her tantrums. The filth she talked. Sometimes not coming out of her room for ten days, sitting there, staring at nothing. Thank God for Dr. Kaplan, he arranged for a mental hospital. Expert care she got, never mind the expense. We did without. They gave her electro-shock therapy, the latest thing in modern medicine. She

comes home she slits her wrists in the bathtub for a thank you. The ambulance sits outside. Everybody is peeking through their curtains. Mrs. Charnofsky was so ashamed she wouldn't leave the apartment for a week. On top of all my other duties I have to do the shopping or come home to tuna sandwiches. (147)

Clara, after experiencing an abortion, attempts suicide for a second time, but unfortunately this time she succeeds: she will benefit a pretty wide fame as a young gifted poetess only posthumously. The excerpt above taken from the meeting between Barney and Clara's father is meaningful to understand which folly Jewish orthodoxy might reach: Mr. Charnofsky demonstrates neither love nor compassion for his daughter's death. On the contrary, he stops at first impressions and even judges her and Barney on the basis of their crumbling house, totally disregarding the personal feelings involved. Second thoughts, comprehension and self-criticism are far from him.

Richler has always rejected strict religious laws, but he was a convinced believer as Gopnik's passage shows:

While Richler as a youth repudiated the religious orthodoxy of his family, he embraced a socialist – liberal, progressive – form of Zionism. Sometimes, as boys do, he imagined himself as a Jewish Avenger fighting the Arabs. In later years, he reaffirmed this commitment by visiting Israel, and by writing articles and a book about those visits. In his novels he sometimes satirized Jewish fundraising events and activities. Barney Panofsky (*Barney's Version*), for example, uses his voluntary position with the United Jewish Appeal as a kind of social camouflage. Richler's nonfiction recollection of the boy who introduced him to militant Zionism, and what became of him, is a sober reflection on what sometimes becomes of youthful ideals. (197)

The personal experience of the writer is here resumed, from his initial commitment to Zionist religion, to his two trips to Israel reported in *This Year in Jerusalem*. When he was young, he would highly consider the Zionist cause and strongly believe in a Jewish revenge; however, from the very beginning he found in Jewish orthodoxy a strictness which did not correspond to his own religious values, so he decided to keep at a distance from it at the price of disappointing his mother and his grandfather, who were very Orthodox Jews. His ambivalent relation of love-hatred with Judaism is a main topic in most of his novels, as well as the strong attachment to his homeland, Canada.

Together with the tragic episode concerning Clara's death, there is also a great amount of irony in the novel, especially targeted on Jewish religion and Jews' irony. In fact, after having returned to Montreal, the second part of the novel, the one dealing with the Second Mrs. Panofsky, is extremely hilarious, and Barney deliberately turns into the perfect Jewish husband. Clara had forecasted this possibility, as Barney reflects:

Drinking alone in the early-morning hours, fearful of sleep, which was invaded by visions of Clara in her coffin. The coffin, as ordained by Jewish law, was made of pine, holes drilled into it, so that the worms might fatten on that too-young corpse as soon as possible. Six feet under. Her breast rotting. "...you'll be able to entertain guys at the United Jewish Appeal dinner with stories about the days you lived with the outrageous Clara." Bingeing on respectability, I was now determined to prove to Clara's ghost that I could play the nice middle-class Jewish boy better than she had ever dreamed. (187)

In *Barney's Version*, the religious issue is very much present, but the protagonist displays an ambivalent relation with it: on the one hand, Jewish strict laws are a source of mockery and the target of Barney's irony; on the other hand, he respects Judaism and remembers with a nostalgic attitude his past as a young Jew. Clara played such an important

role in Barney's youth, that the memories of her continue to influence his thoughts and his behavior, especially as a Jew, also in later years. In fact, what pushed Barney toward the second Mrs. Panofsky was not a true feeling, but a sort of revenge, as if he wanted to prove to Clara that he could behave as a real bourgeois Jewish man, and in order to do so, he needs a rich and bourgeois Jewish wife. The description of Clara's corpse underground is a very brutal image, probably because Barney still fears guilty for her death: even now, after her death, the same Jewish laws which Clara despised but was forced to accept when she was alive, are here once again present in the description of the coffin, as if she had not been able to get rid of them until the very end. However, the situation itself is turned into a mockery in the second part of the excerpt, as if becoming a 'straight arrow' (185) was a sort of challenge Barney has to overcome. Raising money for the 'United Jewish Appeal', one of the major Jewish philanthropic associations is part of his plan, together with the marriage with the Second Mrs. Panofsky, the purchase of a rich property in Hampstead and the creation of the 'Totally Unnecessary Production'.

Episodes of irreverent humor concerning the Jewish religion can also be found later on in the text, as Irv's words show:

Israel itself could soon become just another goyishe country. But, for all that, the Israelis are now the only anti-Semites we can still count on. Let's face it, they hate diaspora Jews. You speak a word of Yiddish there they want to flush you down the toilet. 'Oh, you must be one of those ghetto Jews.' After all these years of fund-raising, and I must be personally responsible for at least fifty million squeezed out of here over the years, and I go over there and they tell me I'm a bad Jew because my children haven't settled there and don't serve on the front lines." (200)

Irv Nussbaum is Barney's uncle and a major fund-raiser for Israel, who recruited Barney as a campaigner. The dialogues between Barney and Irv are definitely hilarious, and in this excerpt a clear criticism toward Israeli Jews who consider Diaspora Jews as second-class believers is evident. As a matter of fact, Jews who did not make aliyah, such as Mordecai Richler, are discredited at the eyes of some Orthodox Israeli: Irv is complaining here for this unfair treatment. Israel itself runs the risk of becoming a 'goyishe country', namely a non-Jewish country, due to the recent increasing immigration: despite that, episodes of anti-Semitism are still frequent, as the example above shows. Therefore, the author is openly criticizing this intolerant attitude of some Orthodox Jews.

Furthermore many Jewish characters in the novel are far from being moral examples: for instance, the coquettish Second Mrs. Panofsky, who belongs to a bourgeois family of Montreal, is highly ridiculed, as well as Barney's father the Inspector Izzy Panofsky. Other examples of self-irony concerning the Montreal Jewish community are very much present in the text, and the lavish wedding ceremony between Barney and the Second Mrs. Panofsky is itself a parody: an enthusiastic bride is deeply engaged in entertaining conversations with her hosts while an absent-minded bridegroom often disappears to watch the last hockey score.

2.3.2 Back to Montreal

The second and third part of the novel, respectively entitled 'The Second Mrs. Panofsky 1958-1960' and 'Miriam 1960-', officially establish Barney's return to his cherished hometown, Montreal. As a matter of fact, Richler has already proved to be a local novelist, and he succeeds in conveying this sense of belonging to Montreal through the protagonist's adventures. Once again in Gopnik's words:

Yet there was, in the arc of his career, something interestingly double, complicatedly ambiguous. He was there. If Leonard Cohen was the one who got away, Richler was the one who got away and then got back, the one who came home to Montreal.... The lure of place and home was powerful for him because he was, in the best nineteenth-century sense, a local novelist, one who owned a place. (in qd Webb 7)

It is very interesting the employment of the word 'double' in Gopnik's sentence: he refers to the double need of the author to initially go away and then come back, because he is part of the Montreal reality he writes about, differently from Leonard Cohen who managed to really 'escape'. This double need is echoed in his novels as well, through the protagonists' personal experiences: Barney, similarly to Richler, went away only to come back after many years. The only place which truly mirrors Richler's personality, also as a writer, is Montreal: his written production would have certainly suffered hadn't he come back to his roots.

Despite the fact that Barney's second marriage might be considered as a mere grey zone between Clara and Miriam, in reality it is an important stage in the evolution of the protagonist's identity: in fact, it represents the turning point of the novel and Barney's passage from boyhood to maturity. When dealing with hyphenated identities, one of the central issues is the matter of locating identity, and through Barney's European experiences the reader has the chance to reshape that concept and see how those years influence the protagonist of the novel: the building of the protagonist's identity through those experiences appears here fundamental. The concept of identity is a fluid concept, even from a spatial viewpoint, and through his pilgrimages Barney was also able to define his identity.

Once back to Montreal, the writer well expresses the feelings of disorientation and disappointment experienced by Barney's son, Michael:

To digress briefly, as Barney was so fond of saying, all my recent trip to Montreal have been depressing. This, not only because of our father's condition, but also in recognition of what has become of the city I grew up in. When I got out the phone book, hoping to get in touch with old friends who had been to McGill with me, I discovered that all but two or three had moved to Toronto, Vancouver, or New York, rather than endure the burgeoning tribalism. Of course, looked at from abroad, what was happening in Quebec seemed risible. There are actually grown men out here, officers of the Commission de protection de la langue française, who go out with tape measures every day to ensure that the English language lettering on outdoor commercial signs is half the size, and in no brighter colour, than the French. (403-404)

Michael does not identify anymore with old school friends or with the city, which has changed in the past years mostly from a political and social viewpoint. The policy of the protection of French language is here attacked: the new laws appear damaging for the English speakers: outdoor commercial signs in English must be half the size of French ones. Richler has always thought that such laws only ended with providing more chaos and intolerance among the Quebec population, and he visibly felt hurt by those impositions. As it clearly appears in *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec! Requiem for a Divided Country* Richler has no confidence in language institutions such as the Commission de protection de la langue française. There is also a hint of irony toward his former friends who left Montreal for Toronto, Vancouver or New York, as if they should have fought for the country's cause and 'endure the burgeoning tribalism'. Therefore, Richler employs harsh words for the current political situation which, according to him, is closer to tribalism than to democracy.

Even though the second and the third part of the novel represent a sort of coming back to origins, I reckon that a strong bond with his own land and culture has always been present in Barney's character. Therefore the geographical move to Montreal appears a natural

process, and his Jewish legacy, which is sometimes perceived as a haunting presence, is always very much to the fore, either as a source of mockery or as a serious issue, mostly concerning Jewish radical attitudes, as in Clara's father case.

2.3.3 *Barney's Mysterious Identity*

While the plot of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* follows a chronological order, in *Barney's Version* we are presented with an often raving collection of memories presented in a non-chronological order: in fact, it is a first-person narration, thus very much influenced by Barney's viewpoint. On the contrary, in the case of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, the reader encounters a third-person narration: therefore, despite a narrow focusing on the protagonist, the narration appears far more reliable. Furthermore, Barney Panofsky is also affected by Alzheimer's disease, so his telling is rough and full of blanks. The mental confusion of the old protagonist is often highlighted in the text thanks to the frequent 'memory tests' that Barney imposes on himself: "Memory test. Quick, Barney. Names of the Seven Dwarfs. Grouchy, Sneezy, Sleepy, Doc. I know the names of the other three. Got them right just last night. They'll come to me. I'm not going to look them up." (57)

Such interruptions to the natural course of the story are frequent, and they are meant to both plunge the reader deeply into the protagonist's mind, and to purposely break the rhythm of the narration: the result is an extremely natural narration, with a good deal of irony. In particular, the employment of self-irony definitely helps to minimize Barney's disease and to take facts not too seriously: it conveys the sense of a smooth narration and a conversational tonality. Interestingly enough, at the very beginning, the reader has the impression that the narrator, who here coincides with the protagonist, is accurately reporting what really occurred to him, since he talks about his personal experiences. Nevertheless, the first-person narration is a slippery subject by definition, and Barney's unreliability about the

facts narrated is so emphasized in the course of the novel that the reader is warned not to take Barney's words at face value. Moreover, digressions are extremely frequent to the point that they are to be taken as a structuring device of the text:

I'm digressing. I know, I know. But this is my one and only story, and I'm going to tell it exactly how I please. And you are now into a short detour into that territory that Holden Caulfield once deprecated as that Nicholas Nickleby sort of crap. Or was it Oliver Twist? No, Nickleby. I'm sure of it. (47)

Even while making a reference to the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* written by J. D. Salinger, Barney misquotes Copperfield's words, possibly because he does not revise what he has written. Most parts of the novel seem Barney Panofsky's spontaneous interior monologues so the reader gets the feeling of a stream-of-consciousness type of narration.

To stress Barney's unreliability even more, his son Michael is in charge of clarifying and revising his father's words in order to give them credibility: in fact, before the publication of the autobiography, Michael adds footnotes and an Afterword where he speaks in memory of his deceased father. However, here again, the reader encounters once more a first-person narration; therefore, the audience never know whether the revision is a proper one. Michael questionably recollects past events concerning dead protagonists, who consequently cannot have a word on what is narrated or revised, and he was not even born when most of those events took place. The implicit question is: should the audience trust Michael more than Barney? I would answer: none of them entirely, because the narration is definitely subjective and depending on the narrator's viewpoint.

The novel's fil rouge is the disappearance of Boogie, Barney's best friend, occurred in Barney's cottage after a quarrel between the two some 30 years before: apparently, they were both drunk and Barney fired a shot from his father's gun just before Boogie

disappeared. Consequently, the protagonist was charged with homicide, but there were not enough proofs to condemn him (Boogie's corpse was never found): so he was not imprisoned. Barney has always declared himself innocent: he could have not killed his best friend, to whom he was devoted. However, the protagonist is discredited by that charge and the reader is naturally pushed to investigate about *Barney's Version* of facts, since there are no evidences of his innocence as well; furthermore, he might have adjusted what actually happened at the cottage and no one could demonstrate the contrary: once again, the protagonist appears untrustworthy.

The Afterward, entirely written by Michael Panofsky, mainly deals with the recent discovery of Boogie's bones in the forest by the lake near Barney's cottage: apparently, Boogie died on an accident. He was likely to have been raised from the lake where he was swimming by a water-bomber and then released on the forest from a high altitude, in a practice run by forest fire fighters which is no longer as common as it used to be. Therefore, Boogie died on the crash with the soil, and Barney's innocence is finally proved:

Then the real-estate agent arrived with the Fourniers. After an exchange of niceties, I excused myself, driving off. I had covered a good ten miles before I hit the brakes and pulled over on the shoulder. Oh my God, I thought, breaking into a sweat, I had better call Saul. I owe Kate an apology. But, oh God, it's too late for Barney. He's beyond understanding now. Damn damn damn.

Michael's words apparently demonstrate that Barney was telling the truth, but, unfortunately, it's too late, since Barney has already died. Interestingly enough Michael employs the words 'he's beyond understanding now': I deem that Barney has always been at least partially beyond understanding. As a matter of fact, readers do not reach a satisfactory level of acquaintance with him, and his words are definitely untrustworthy. In this respect,

Barney's words sound prophetic: "Before his brain begun to shrink, Barney Panofsky clung to two cherished beliefs. Life was absurd, and nobody ever truly understood anybody else. Not a comforting philosophy, and one I certainly don't subscribe to" (406). Barney's life was definitely characterized by absurd coincidences of events, and his account also demonstrates to which point human beings are mysterious: Barney with his attempt to present his version of the facts to discharge himself from the accusation of homicide leveled against him by Terry MacIver, is not convincing, and what the reader has at the end is just another version of the facts.

For this reason, the word 'version' in the novel's title is crucial: the reader never knows whether what Barney is telling is true or not, and if so, to which point his narration is accurate. Therefore, what is also suggested in the text is that truth is not so important, and that the reader is free to believe whatever 'version' of facts he/she prefers.

3. Genres which escape conventional definitions in Richler's Novels

3.1: From the Jewish Hero to Richler's Anti-Hero

I will here discuss why Richler's protagonists are to be considered anti-heroes, thus aligning himself with other North American novelists such as Philip Roth, and why did Richler choose such characters as his novels' protagonists. As a matter of fact, differently from a branch of the Jewish literary tradition which tends to worship the Jewish tradition and the main protagonists of Jewish history as sacred heroes, in a more or less evident way, Richler prefers to concentrate his attention on characters who may be considered anti-heroes for several reasons which will be here presented.

This attitude and the clear purpose of putting on stage mediocre examples of human beings, is not at all far from the typical Canadian attitude. The following excerpt supports this viewpoint: "I've always been interested in mythical figures, but Salomon Gursky is too complex a hero to be a hero. I think Canadians are too skeptical to believe in heroes anyway. We're not super-patriots like the Americans, and I think that's one of our more engaging characteristics. It makes us much more likeable" (Posner 251).

I reckon that the essence of Canadian ideology is contained in the previous lines: Canadians wish to distinguish themselves from the US tradition and tend to be anti-patriots. Those two characteristics are tightly linked, and I have already mentioned Canadians' inclination to behave as victims, as Margaret Atwood maintained in her introduction to 'Can lit'. Certainly, Atwood presents this attitude with an explicit criticism, however it is true that Canadians appear much more 'likeable' to the international audience when they present themselves with a certain reserve and humility, which often is lacking in US literary tradition.

The case of Richler's novel *Salomon Gursky was here* merits a few words: this novel is meant to be a revisited narration of the last 200 years of Canadian history in a style which resembles very much South American magic realism, and particularly *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Knopf). Salomon gathers the reader's attention, but his figure is ghostly throughout the novel: there are no means to really get in touch with him, and his majestic personality and wonderful deeds are worshipped by his biographer, Moses Berger. Therefore, even in this case, what is presented is not a Jewish-Canadian hero, but more likely a chimeric character who apparently made the recent history of Canada and who belongs to that history as well.

Richler aims at representing human types mostly of Jewish origins with a certain lightness, often reducing them to caricatures and stereotypes: this attitude is typical of the satirist: "As for characterization, Richler has created anti-heroes who are both pathetic and hilarious, villains who are thoroughly scurrilous, an authentic panorama of Jewish types, and galleries of incidental caricatures and miniature parodies" (Myers 48). For instance, taking into consideration Duddy Kravitz, he is an evident example of antihero: Richler chooses a definitely corrupted protagonist, thus rendering the natural identification of the reader with the protagonist almost impossible. It is precisely due to this lightness while dealing with Jewish subjects and the lack of moral judgments which caused Richler the accusation of anti-Semitism, especially with the publication of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. Duddy appears here in all his brilliant malice:

In Duddy's relationship with MacPherson, we see the worst aspects of Duddy, who is shown to be rude, uncooperative, disrespectful, unfeeling and vindictive. The central character, we begin to understand, is no conventional hero, but rather an anti-hero. Further, the relationship emphasizes one of the themes of the novel, which might be

expressed as the clash between idealism and practical materialism: MacPherson embodies the former attitude, and Duddy embodies the latter. (Coles 55)

Richler expresses quite clearly in this novel as well as in other novels how ‘practical materialism’ wins over moral values: for as much different as the protagonists of his novels might be, they are usually very pragmatic and amoral. I believe the writer explicitly wished to depict a no-frills reality in his fiction: facts are not soothed, happy ending is not expected. Literary realism and honesty, at the price of resulting unpleasant, are fundamental to his work:

He was always highly controversial. His antipathy toward mediocrity and “boosterism,” which he satirized with the utmost relish, earned him the ire of cultural nationalists; his fictional portrayals of Jews caused offence in sections of the community. His references to women and race in his novels raised concerns. His send-ups of the more absurd claims of political correctness earned him accusations of picking on easy targets. His observations of his native Quebec raised storms of protest and also shouts of approval. His reply was that he did not write to please. He was a witness to his time. (Vassanji 3-4)

Therefore, his job is ambitious and his novels have not always been well accepted by the public. An exhilarating example of a petty native Quebecois is presented in the satiric novel *The Incomparable Atuk*, whose protagonist is another kind of antihero. Richler’s protagonists, as the author himself, are also intolerant toward intellectuals’ boosterism, often found in smart professors of Toronto or Montreal: on the contrary, such protagonists shine for their coarse characters, and even stress their rudeness to distinguish themselves from conceited intellectuals. For instance, in *Barney’s Version*, Miriam’s second husband is ironically called with scorn ‘Herr Doktor Hopper né Hauptman’, thus mocking his figure

outright. On the contrary, Barney gains the reader's sympathy with his nipping humor and his gushing sympathy: the reader cannot but like Barney, in spite of his evident awful character.

Moreover, the religious issue acquires here a great importance: not only did Richler portray Jewish 'types', but he also overturned the typical figure of the Jewish Avenger. In fact, the Jewish hero often correspond to the so called Jewish Avenger (Sachs). Historically, the Jewish avenger is a Jew determined to take revenge for all the evil-doing at the expense of the Jewish population, especially during the II World War: such Jewish avenger is even ready to kill for his holy mission. In the case of Richler, such heroic figure is transfigured, lightened, and totally overturned, so that the result is once again a faded image of heroism:

The Holocaust is rarely altogether absent from Richler's work. His response often takes the form of a character who fights back against his oppressors. Some of Richler's avengers are more effective than others; a few are ambiguous. The Boy Wonder (*The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*) shows that Jews can be powerful – but he's a crook. The fictional cousin Joey (*St. Urbain Horseman*), like the remembered, pseudonymous Jerry Greenfield (*This year in Jerusalem*), is a failure who once seemed to embody a promise of triumph against the odds. Hy Rosen (*Cocksure*) is triumphant only in his own mind – but that, perhaps, is triumph enough. (Webb 141)

Therefore, the image of the Jewish Avenger is present in Richler's novels, but its limits and imperfections are far more stressed than its heroic traits, and the whole impression is of mockery: all the characters embodying this figure show evident failures, and the 'revenge' eventually fails. Richler deals with Jewish themes and the Jewish topic for excellence, namely Holocaust. However, the simplistic logic of oppressed-oppressor, where the oppressed are revenged by the Jewish hero, does not work in this case: beside winners and losers, Richler depicts first of all human beings with the realism already mentioned.

Furthermore, the so called ‘oppressed’ Jews are definitely far from being morally unblemished, so any kind of moral vengeance on the oppressors is at the very best, partial.

Despite the protagonists’ evident amorality, Richler does not stand as a moralist himself, far from it:

Mordecai Richler has described himself as a serious novelist and affirms that any serious writer is essentially a moralist. But to come to his work for homilies and axioms is to be disappointed. His novels conclude with no formulated wisdom. Though he celebrates the traditional virtues, what concerns him is his protagonists’ process of discovering the validity of these virtues in a more or less amoral, contemporary society, and their conflicting desire both to protest against this society and to accommodate themselves to it. All his novels so far reflect this thematic pattern and bear out his observation that every “serious writer has...one theme, many variations to play on it”. (Ramraj 11)

Certainly, Richler celebrates the traditional values as far as family and society are concerned; but he is not a conventional writer, especially when choosing his novels’ protagonists. The case of *St. Urbain Horseman* differs quite significantly from *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *Barney’s Version*: Jake Hersch has a strong morality, and the relation between him and his wife has a dreamy tinge: “They are shown to feel a very deep love for one another and the loyalty of this love under duress provides the ethical counterbalance to the sordidness, instability, lack of integrity, injustice, and grasping materialism that Richler is satirizing in this book” (Myers 57). Jake and his wife Nancy stand as symbols of integrity in a world of “grasping materialism”, where even good deeds are misinterpreted as false. This is the reason why Jake Hersch is finally sacrificed by the end of the novel, and why he sees a fighter for justice in his cousin Joey, the Horseman, where the

others see a crook. However, behind such a pure protagonist, who stands out not simply among the other characters, but also among the other protagonists in previous and following novels of Richler, there possibly is just a coward, whose devotion to his cousin Joey is due to the fact that he is able to do something Jake would never do: rebelling against his family and his community. Nevertheless, even such a perfect couple like Jake-Nancy shows some cracks very soon, and the reality presented is far from being dream-like: no one really ends up being a good character in Richler's novel, from the Jewish community members to Jake's family and friends. For instance, his colleague Harry Stein, who has a close relationship with Jake, will turn out to be responsible for Jake's trial. Paradoxically, Joey, the Horseman, cannot be depicted as an honest person but at least he presents himself for what he is. The general impression is of a sad and hypocrite world surrounding a rather honest protagonist: but even Jake is looking for an evasion. He cannot stand as an hero because he does not have the courage to act nor think freely, he is psychologically compliant with society. He ends up being a victim, possibly because there is not a more suitable role for him in such a corrupted world.

Jake Hersch hopes to change the world, a belief totally impossible to Richler, who believes that the world is absurd and that what a writer can do is simply describing such an absurd world without pretentiousness. Finally, the image of the protagonist presented to the reader is more that of a loser than of a hero: "He is hardly a great flame, for he is not meant as a hero, but rather as someone who is representative of the helplessness of so many of his readers, who long for a saner world but don't see how to go about attaining it" (Myers 56).

Interestingly enough, the near totality of Richler's protagonists find their idol in very controversial characters: in fact, they are often outlaws and show a worrying lack of integrity. For this reason, not only are Richler's protagonists anti-heroes, but also their idols are anti-heroes themselves. For instance, in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, Duddy finds in the

Boy Wonder an accomplished businessman he wants so much to resemble to, also due to his father's influence. He is a self-made man, whose story is a rags-to-riches story:

The Boy Wonder was a God-fearing man and he didn't smoke or drive his car or place bets on the Sabbath. His father had spent ten years in prison and his Uncle Joe had been shot down on the street during the bad days, but Jerry Dingleman had never been involved even indirectly in any bloodshed or spent a day behind bars. Not before the time of his personal trouble, anyway. (129)

He then turns out to be a drug bootlegger and a pimp, not to mention other illegal businesses, so his image of pure self-made man is very soon discredited. Despite that, Duddy shows an endless devotion to him, for the simple reason that he has succeeded: in fact, he becomes extremely angry with his father when he discovers that the two are not intimate friends, since he wanted to be properly introduced to him and to become his business partner. By the end of the novel Duddy will despise the Boy Wonder, but he demonstrates to be not better than him: in a certain way he exceeded the Boy Wonder's abilities, and succeeds in becoming the only owner of the land around the lake Sainte-Agate-des-Monts. Duddy no longer needs to idolize somebody: he is the living proof of success.

Another example is provided by Barney's devotion toward his friend Boogie. Boogie seems less dangerous than the Boy Wonder, but he presents himself as a completely good-for-nothing man:

In one of his manic moods Boogie would throw up lots of smoke, deflecting questions about his work by clowning. "Look at me," he once said, "I've got all the faults of Tolstoy, Dostoievsky, and Hemingway rolled into one. I will fuck just about any peasant girl who will have me. I'm an obsessive gambler. A drunk. Hey, just like Freddy D., I'm even an anti-Semite, but maybe that doesn't count in my case as I'm

Jewish myself. So far, all that's lacking in the equation is my very own Yasnaya Polyana, a recognition of my prodigious talent, and money for tonight's dinner, unless you're inviting me? God bless you, Barney." (9)

Barney is totally devoted to his friend, and while thinking about him many years later he confessed "I loved Boogie and miss him something awful" (11). Another important reason why Barney esteems him so much is that he succeeded where Barney failed: Boogie was an excellent writer, but he wasted his talent. An amazing book reader, Boogie was able to astonish his audience every time; on the contrary, among so many artists or pretended artists in Paris, Barney's major ability was in the market field. For the reasons listed by Boogie himself, he should not stand as an example, but he represents Barney's alter-ego, the hidden part which never came to the surface. Barney could not have killed Boogie, because he was a point of reference to him, and killing him would also mean killing a part of himself; furthermore, Boogie was very much linked to Parisian souvenirs in Barney's mind, so the relationship between the two also reminded him of his European years he missed so much.

3.2: Satire Irony and Black Humour in Richler's Novels

Mordecai Richler was not simply a well-acclaimed screenwriter and essayist: he was also a brilliant satirist, and in his works he usually makes a large use of irony, which often becomes self-irony, and humour. His inclination to mockery is an intrinsic feature of his writing which has a clear purpose, which is basically either to entertain the reader or to make fun of given situations or characters, or both of them. A standard definition of satire and irony, taken from the Oxford's dictionary, can be useful as a starting point. The term satire in literature refers to "a piece of writing in which you use humour to show a person's, an idea's or an institution's faults or weaknesses." On the other hand, the term irony refers to "the amusing or strange aspect of a situation that is very different from what you expect" or "the use of words that say the opposite of what you really mean, often as a joke and with a tone of voice that shows this."

Canadian authors seem to be particularly inclined to writings full of humor. This attitude is very much linked to the need of surviving: "Satire, self-mockery, humor: these are strategies for survival, and even for a kind of celebration, as well as art forms. (But then, art forms are strategies for survival.) And satire, self-mockery, and humor are the kinds of literature in which Canadians shine" (Cook 222). Humor and satire are stylistic choices which are also linked to the content of the specific piece of writing; but there is a general Canadian trend which favors them as a means of survival, even by ironically dealing with Canadian topics and often employing self-mockery as well. Authors are able to make fun of specific Canadian attitudes and consequently experience a sort of catharsis. Those are art forms but also strategies for survival, and I would also add means to become known to the international audience through mockery and emphasized anti-patriotism.

In the case of Richler's novels, satire and irony are variously employed for different purposes, even though they are often both present in the same novel. Humor mirrors Richler's viewpoint concerning wide topics, such as men's identity: "The humor in the novel, then, is not simply an entertaining extra, a kind of sugar coating laid upon the more bitter pill of Richler's theme. Much of the humor is an intrinsic illustration of Richler's view of the human condition, for it is rooted in the basic incongruity that is man" (Coles 89). Humorous writing is structural to his writing.

Certainly, there are specific topics which are Richler's favorite targets for satire and irony; however, satire is profusely employed, thus he uses it independently from characters, setting or given historical moments:

I'm trying to be an honest witness to my times, so I tend to write satirically. These are the only times I know. A writer who thinks he can change the world is out of his mind. I have no illusions about making the world a better place. That's obviously absurd. Like the world is absurd. That's why I write about it. (Posner 221)

Richler is persuaded that life is fundamentally absurd, as he states in *Barney's Version*, so he chooses not to change the world, but to describe it with all its faults but, most of all, all the contradictions making it absurd. I already presented him as a careful observer of his own time and place, and honesty while dealing with human condition and its faults is a trait Richler always took seriously, and never overlooked. While describing our 'absurd' world, he employs a great deal of irony, as the following very well-known excerpt of *Barney's Version* shows:

I got out of bed, slipped into the threadbare dressing-gown which I couldn't part with, because it was a gift from Miriam, and padded into the kitchen. Rummaging through drawers, I yanked out utensils and named them one-two-three: soup ladle, egg timer,

tongs, pie splicer, vegetable peeler, tea strainer, measuring cups, can opener, spatula... and hanging on a wall hook, there it was, the thingumabob used to strain spaghetti, but what was it called? (14)

This ‘colander episode’ is not the only funny moment in the novel, since the comic side is especially exaggerated in *Barney’s Version*; in the following excerpt old Barney is reflecting upon his flawed life without sparing his closer friends, his children or even himself:

I was an anomaly. No. An anomie. A natural-born entrepreneur. I hadn’t won awards at McGill, like Terry, or been to Harvard or Columbia, like some of the others. I had barely squeezed through high school, having invested more time at the tables of the Mount Royal Billiards Academy than in classes, playing snooker with Duddy Kravitz. Couldn’t write. Didn’t paint. Had no artistic pretensions whatsoever, unless you count my fantasy of becoming a music hall song-and-dance man tipping my straw boater to the good folks in the balcony as I fluttered off stage in my taps, yielding to Peaches, Ann Corio, Lili St. Cyr, or some other exotic dances, who would bring her act to a drum-throbbing climax with a thrilling flash of bare tit, in days long before lap-dancers had become the norm in Montreal. (4)

Part of the irony in *Barney’s Version* is constituted by the protagonist’s awareness of his discredited past and of his terrible character: he is very much self-ironical and deliberately stresses his faults to entertain his audience:

In a nutshell, I am not unaware of my failings. Neither am I a stranger to irony. I realize that I – who took The Second Mrs. Panofsky’s rambling conversation to be an abomination – have consumed hundreds of pages, piling digression upon digression, to avoid getting to that seminal weekend in the Laurentians that all but destroyed my life, rendering unto me my reputation as a murderer, which is believe by some to this day.

So coming up at last, the lowdown. Exit Boogie. Enter Detective-Sergeant Sean O’Hearne. And I’m willing to swear that what follows is the truth. I am innocent. Honestly. So help me God, as they say. (271)

The tendency to present from the very beginning a truly debauched character is a feature I have already presented in Richler’s novels: what is interesting here is the total lack of reserve toward the reader, and the clear wish to depict the protagonist deprived of any social convention or human ambition. He is what the reader sees in the very first pages of the novel. Richler has always presented an urban specificity typical of the Montreal ghetto; similarly, in the case of irony and satire as well, the provincial reality represents his subject of criticism: “No one now, forty years later, would argue with that. But it is ironic nonetheless that the provincialism he ridiculed was what in fact gave him the opportunity to express himself” (Vassanji 128). Always within a circumscribed territory, always inside the borders, he discusses and makes fun of certain aspects of the society he is acquainted with, notably the question of Jewish-Canadian identity. What is stressed in particular is not the good and genuine side of human beings: on the contrary, human envies and little clashes rekindle his writing and help sustaining his viewpoint. In the case of the novel *The Incomparable Atuk*, this appears pretty evident:

Using this “minority” character, a far from noble or simple savage, who is patronized and used politically and culturally but who in turn learns to play the game to his personal advantage, Richler exposes all the pettiness and smallness of the cultural scene as he saw it, hanging out to ridicule the pretensions and absurdities patently obvious in the cultural nationalism of the day, the cynism and greed of big business, the gullibility of the masses, and the hypocrisies and contradictions of special interest and identity groups. (Vassanji 126)

The protagonist is an Eskimo poet who moves to Toronto in search of fame and, after having interiorized the logic of profit, turns into a scruple less businessman even ready to kill a relative to reach his personal success. This shameful example of human being is the overturned version of the myth of the noble savage of Rousseau. What is stressed in the narration is the moving of a naïf Eskimo poet into the rat race of the metropolis: this transformation, which has clear drawbacks, is harshly criticized by the Old One, who is the protagonist's father. The Old One is a blameless Inuk who keeps in a very high consideration his tribe's values, which are his own moral values: therefore, the comparison with the by the time corrupted son is truly unfair. Moreover, the Old One stands as an icon of past Canadian ideals, which share too many features with Jewish ideals to be a coincidence. This appears quite clear in the following excerpt: "You know something, Old One. You're a bigot. You've never overcome your igloo mentality" (Richler, *The Incomparable Atuk* 65). The so called Igloo-mentality the modern Atuk does not fully accept, reminds the reader of the Jewish mentality, providing once more an example of a maverick protagonist, whose behavior is objectionable, but who represents a clear cut with the past. In this sense, always drawing a comparison with the Jewish community, he is an outsider like Noah Adler or Duddy Kravitz. Similarly to them, he is engaged with a girl who does not belong to the community: in the case of Atuk, she is a non-Eskimo girl, in the other cases she is a shiksa. This is also an autobiographical reference, since Richler's first wife was not Jewish, so his being an outsider is evident also in his private life, not simply in the religious practice.

The issue of identity is very much explored in *The Incomparable Atuk*: the protagonist's image changes very much from the beginning of the novel, where he stands as a Canadian icon of purity, to the end of it, where he is finally sacrificed for a jest of cannibalism. Interestingly enough, not only does Richler play with the image of the pure Eskimo corrupted by the Canadian society, and very much willing to be corrupted to his own

interest, but the protagonist himself plays with his cultural and linguistic differences in various moments of the novel. Atuk is extremely talented in self-depreciation (Neff Van Aertselaer), a cultural tool he employs to seduce Bette Dolan, a young and famous swimmer and Canadian icon. The cultural legacy of both Canadians and Eskimos is the fuel of the image of Atuk provided to the audience; furthermore, since the novel was published in 1963, there is a clear irony and criticism toward the new power of medias, so the image of the innocent savage is very much stressed to impress the audience.

The case of Bette Dolan is clearly humorous: she is initially presented as a virtuous young woman who has become a national hero for having swum in the lake Memphremagog for nearly 24hours. She is also her father's pride, therefore delivering also the image of the perfect daughter in a conventionally stereotyped family. Then, the meeting with Atuk overturns the situation: moved by her inner wish to help people, she is made to believe that Atuk has a real problem, he cannot make love. The devotion she employs to 'help' him overcoming his disease is a source of humor and as the narrator later on says, she could not stop helping other people too.

Coming back to Judaism, the religious and cultural dimension of Jews constitute another big target of Richler's satire and irony:

Richler was a wonderful writer of farce. And the times in which he lived provided him with an embarrassment of material to fashion into comic prose. He satirized everything from modern parenting and the sexual revolution to television and the film business. These were easy targets, and no other writer skewered them with such joyful savagery. Jewish themes, however, were tougher topics for satire. His portrait of Duddy Kravitz as a Jew "on the make", for example, earned him the wrath of some members of the Jewish community who viewed Richler as a "self-hating Jew" – or worse. (Webb 221)

Therefore, beside sexual revolution and the influence of medias in modern lifestyle, as appears evident in *The Incomparable Atuk* and *Cocksure* for instance, Richler employs irony toward his Jewish community. He was particularly concerned about revealing hypocrisies and contradictions at the core of the community, since those contradictions appear much more evident when dealing with the newly born state of Israel (Soloway 93). Concerning this topic, humor is still present but it is satire which plays a major role: this is one of the major criterions which distinguishes the two protagonists I have mostly dealt with, namely Duddy and Barney. If *Barney's Version* is full of ironic dialogues and ironic episodes, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* is a clear satirical portrait of Richler's ghetto, even though elements of satire are present in the first novel as well as elements of irony are present in the second one. The satirical passages which characterize the first novel are far from the irony present in Barney's words, and more specifically delimited to the ghetto area. As Gopnik states: "It is a form of satiric realism, deliberately circumscribed of obvious ambition – rooted in a desire not to buy into it all, to make fun of petty grandiosity by refusing to be grandiose oneself" (Webb 8). It probably does not exist a novel among Richler's production which better highlights human pettiness when rushing for fame and success than *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*.

Not only are there episodes of satire toward the Jewish community in this novel, but there also examples of satire toward some Jews who want to appear unconventional at any cost, such as a former schoolmate of Duddy, Hersh:

Hersh, who had campaigned against the seven cent chocolate bar and come second in the province and won a scholarship to McGill, had quit university. Duddy was astonished. "Jeez," he said. Hersh was no longer short, he'd lost his squint, but he was still somewhat pimply. He had grown up to be a big, chunky man with a long severe head and enormous black eyes. "There was no sense in staying on," he said. "I had no

intention of becoming the apogee of the Jewish bourgeois dream. Namely a doctor or a lawyer.”

“Aha,” Duddy said.

“I think i’ve succeeded in purging myself of the ghetto mentality.”

Duddy took Hersh to his apartment for a drink.

“A writer,” Duddy said. “Can you beat that? How are you doing?”

“Writing isn’t a career. It’s a vocation. I’m not in it for the money.” (227-228)

Jake Hersh wants to distinguish himself from Jewish stereotypes of success, but he ends by being a poor writer riddled with idealism but unable to publish a single work, in spite of his talent. The clash between Duddy, the money-maker, and Hersh is here highlighted.

Furthermore, there are also examples of black humor in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, especially when dealing with Duddy’s friend and former trucker Virgil, who is epileptic and becomes disable due to a street accident on work. There are many references to Virgil’s journal specifically addressed to and dealing with epileptics, entitled “The Crusader: The Only Magazine in the World Published by Epileptics for Epileptics”. Virgil stands as an activist of epileptics’ rights and he reports apparently true episodes concerning lives of very famous people of the past, such as Julius Caesar. The plot of the novel is interrupted to give space to the journal’s excerpts, without introducing them: Virgil’s attempts to fight for rights equality appear evidently pathetic and the writer prefers to offer them without commenting.

Richler efficaciously depicts this character with an irony that is natural to him; however, he might be reproached for being sometimes inaccurate and for having the tendency to drop into easy racial caricatures, which are the biting essence of his writing:

Inevitably, too, there appeared, in his columns, an element of playing to the gallery; he often said the unsayable, regarding Canadian culture, political correctness, and even occasionally the United Jewish Appeal, and this excited his friends and admirers, though one cannot help thinking that he sometimes took the short logical cut, going the straight line, unwilling to glance at the valleys, pay attention to nuances. It is the satirist's job to point out the ludicrous in certain positions, and Richler jumped at the chance whenever some enthusiast for a cause tripped over themselves without realizing it. (Vassanji 150)

Certainly, a satirist must depict the main features of a character or a situation, and caricatures are welcome to present a funny situation with a hint of bitterness. However, the reader might have the impression that, since Richler is one of the few who "said the unsayable regarding Canadian culture", he takes advantage of the satirist's position to forcedly result nonconformist, without sufficiently taking into account nuances.

Conclusion

In my dissertation I dealt with Mordecai Richler's hyphenated protagonists of Jewish-Canadian origins in order to analyze to which extent their cultural and religious legacy has influenced, and is still influencing, their present identity. The Jewish religion and culture is very much present in Richler's personal education, and it is a main ingredient in his production as a writer: always eschewing orthodox Judaism, Richler was a convinced believer and his protagonists are non-orthodox believers as well. The Canadian side of this hyphenated identity is fundamental as well, and I showed the strong bond Richler had with the Canadian soil in general and with the city of Montreal in particular, since, historically, it received one of the biggest Jewish community in North America. I particularly explored the protagonists' evolution while searching for their double identity: interestingly enough, after an initial attempt to leave Montreal and his ghetto, they experienced a return to their origins. The common sense of disorientation the hyphenated protagonists experience, is typical of their quest for a definition, and they developed the need to be reunited with their birth land: the concept of place and of belonging to a particular place has been analyzed when talking about hyphenated identities, in order to demonstrate to which extent those protagonists' identities are rooted in the Canadian soil.

I also investigated the concept of emerging or emerged Jew from the ghetto, highlighting Richler's choice to concentrate on anti-heroes rather than on heroes: I showed how Richler deals with the traditional figure of the Jewish Avenger. Furthermore, I highlighted how the protagonists' several faults are a source of black humor, mockery and self-irony in the novels: the case of Barney Panofsky is a clear example in this sense, since humor plays a major role in the novel, but it is also very much present in other novels, such as *Cocksure* and *The Incomparable Atuk*.

I chose to analyze to a deeper extent *Barney's Version* and *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* because Barney is a sort of evolution of Duddy, thus moving from a 'then' apprenticeship to a 'now' fulfillment (Greenstein) from a temporal viewpoint, and also because those novels reached a considerable fame among the international audience. Barney stands for everything Duddy has always dreamed of: success and richness. However, Duddy's apprenticeship ends with a failure, since he is finally able to acquire the land he so much longed, but he evolves into a corrupted businessman and therefore he becomes his grandfather's shame. On the other hand, while Duddy is still looking for his identity, Barney has apparently accomplished that process, but he remains a mysterious character to the reader: in fact the reader does never come to a complete acquaintance with Barney, and his identity remains a fickle concept, very much depending on the biased viewpoint proposed to the reader, Barney's.

Research on hyphenated identities cannot end: especially as far as Canadian authors are concerned, I found extremely interesting to focus on multicultural identities on the Canadian soil of which the case of Jewish-Canadians is just one example. For this reason, a further research in other types of Canadian hyphenation would be fascinating.

The following quotation encapsulates the present study:

To me, the most interesting and useful area of Canadian literature – whether in its rhetoric or its dialectic – is the area of the hyphen, including the metaphorical hyphens within this country. In a world where all our imagination and intelligence is needed to deal with such hyphens, the best of this country's writing, French and English and other, essay and prose fiction and drama and poem, has something important to say. For most of us our sense of place is still new, still being put together, but we all put it together as against a deluge. (Cook 233)

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