

Ageing, Exile and Inheritance: *St. Urbain's Horseman* and *Barney's Version* as Thematic Twins in the Fiction of Mordecai Richler

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Abstract

This paper examines *St. Urbain's Horseman* and *Barney's Version* by Mordecai Richler as thematic twins, arguing that despite differences in narrative structure and chronology, both novels explore the interconnected themes of ageing, exile, and inheritance. Richler presents ageing not merely as a biological process but as a journey of self-reflection, memory, guilt, and reconciliation. Exile operates on multiple levels - geographical, cultural, psychological, and emotional - shaping the identities of the protagonists and their relationships with family, community, and history. Inheritance extends beyond material wealth to encompass cultural traditions, family legacies, moral responsibilities, and personal memories that define successive generations. Through irony, humour, and fragmented narration, Richler portrays individuals negotiating the tensions between personal freedom and inherited identity. By reading these novels together, the paper demonstrates how they function as complementary narratives that offer a profound meditation on memory, belonging, identity, and the complexities of the human condition in modern Jewish-Canadian experience.

Key Words: Ageing, Exile, Inheritance, Identity, Mordecai Richler

Introduction

Mordecai Richler's career is bracketed by two long, discursive, tragicomic novels that, read together, form a single meditation on what it means to grow old as a Jew displaced from an immigrant past. *St. Urbain's Horseman* (1971) gives us Jake Hersch at thirty-seven, a Montreal-born, London-based film director paralysed by guilt, sexual anxiety and the fear of his own moral mediocrity. *Barney's Version* (1997), published a quarter-century later and only four years before Richler's death, gives us Barney Panofsky at sixty-seven, a television producer whose memoir is simultaneously a confession, a defence and a slow, unwilling record of his own dissolution into Alzheimer's disease. Separated by the two central decades of

Richler's writing life, the novels function less as sequels than as diptych panels: Jake's anxious midlife is the antechamber to Barney's ravaged old age, and both men are haunted by the same inheritance - the memory of immigrant fathers, the ghosts of the Montreal ghetto on St Urbain Street, and the unresolved question of what a Jew owes to a community he has, in practical terms, left behind.

This essay argues that the two novels are thematic twins across five interlocking dimensions. First, both dramatise the psychological burdens of ageing as a distinctly Jewish inheritance: a burden compounded by survivor guilt, inherited moral debt, haunting memory and the fear that assimilation has purchased comfort at the price of authenticity. Second, both novels stage this crisis of ageing against the backdrop of double displacement - from Eastern Europe to Canada, and then from Canada to England - so that the immigrant experience is never singular but doubled, each remove adding a further layer of unbelonging. Third, both novels use an unreliable, self-justifying narrative voice to dramatise how memory itself becomes unstable with age, so that the very form of the novel enacts the psychological deterioration it describes. Fourth, both deploy comedy as a defence against this same guilt and dread, a coping mechanism whose eventual failure, at each novel's point of deepest crisis, is as instructive as its earlier success. Fifth, both stage the question of what this inheritance of guilt and memory passes on to the next generation, showing fatherhood itself as a site of anxious or incomplete transmission between the immigrant past and an assimilated future.

Richler himself left Montreal for Europe as a young man, spending years in Paris and then in England before eventually returning to Canada, and the biographical parallel with both Jake and Barney is unmistakable, though neither character is a simple self-portrait. What Richler drew from his own itinerant life was less a set of autobiographical details than a structural insight: that the immigrant Jew's search for a secure identity is never resolved by a single act of departure, because each new destination reproduces, in a modified form, the very hierarchies of belonging and exclusion the emigrant thought he was escaping. This insight underlies the geographical architecture of both novels, in which Montreal, London and, more obliquely, Paris and New York function not as a simple sequence of homes but as a series of stages on which the same drama of conditional acceptance is performed again and again, with age making the performance ever more exhausting.

Montreal, St Urbain Street, and the Immigrant Inheritance

Richler's fiction returns obsessively to the Montreal of his childhood, the working-class Jewish quarter around St Urbain Street that he mythologised across *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *St. Urbain's Horseman* and, in memory if not in setting, *Barney's Version*. This was a community of Yiddish-speaking

immigrants - tailors, peddlers, small shopkeepers - who had fled pogroms and poverty in Russia, Poland and Romania only to find themselves second-class citizens in a city dominated by an English Protestant business elite and a French Catholic majority that regarded them with equal suspicion. Richler's Jews in these novels are triply marginal: not English, not French, and, within the English-speaking minority itself, not Gentile.

Jake Hersh's father and uncles embody this generation. They are men who worked with their hands, who distrust the professions their sons enter, and whose own aspirations were structurally foreclosed by discrimination in employment, in the universities' quota systems, and in the exclusive clubs and neighbourhoods of Westmount. The psychological burden this places on the second generation is considerable: Jake is expected to vindicate his father's suffering through professional success, yet the very achievement of that success - a comfortable house in London, a career directing films - feels to him like a betrayal, a too-easy escape from a struggle his forebears could not escape. Richler is careful never to sentimentalise this guilt; Jake is frequently absurd, self-pitying and priapic in his anxieties, and the novel's comedy depends on our seeing him simultaneously as a man genuinely burdened by history and as a man using that burden as an alibi for his own failures of nerve and fidelity.

Barney Panofsky's family occupies a slightly later, more assimilated rung of the same ladder. His father, a former policeman turned small businessman, is coarser and more comic than Jake's father but cut from similar cloth: a man of the old neighbourhood, unillusioned, sceptical of his son's pretensions to culture. Barney's own trajectory - from bohemian expatriate in Paris to successful, philistine-baiting television producer in Montreal - repeats Jake's pattern of upward mobility purchased at the cost of communal rootedness. What has changed between 1971 and 1997 is not the shape of this immigrant inheritance but its distance: by the time Barney narrates his life, the old St Urbain Street world exists only in memory, and much of the novel's comedy and pathos derives from Barney's awareness that he is one of the last men alive who remembers it at all. Where Jake still has living, disapproving relatives to answer to, Barney has only his own recollection, itself increasingly unreliable, of a world that has vanished. The immigrant inheritance has thus moved, across the quarter-century separating the two novels, from a present burden to a receding, half-fictionalised past - and this shift maps precisely onto the movement from midlife anxiety to old-age dissolution that structures the two novels' respective treatments of ageing.

England as the Second Exile

Both novels insist that Canada alone cannot contain the immigrant Jew's search for belonging; both send their protagonists to England, and both use that expatriation to expose a second, subtler layer of

antisemitism and exclusion. Jake Hersh's London is the novel's principal setting: he has married an English gentile, Nancy, made a career in British film and television, and outwardly assimilated into the metropolitan literary and theatrical set. Yet Richler repeatedly shows this assimilation to be provisional and conditional. English antisemitism in the novel is rarely the crude violence of the pogrom; it is the more insidious antisemitism of the drawing room, the closed old-boy network of English cultural life, the casual assumption that a Jew, however clever or however English his wife, remains a guest rather than a member of the house. Jake's eventual, almost farcical prosecution — on a trumped-up charge arising from his cousin Harry's sexual misadventures - becomes in the novel a kind of trial by England itself, an opportunity for the host culture to remind the assimilated Jew exactly how contingent his acceptance really is.

Set against this English exile is the counter-myth of Joey Hersh, Jake's cousin, the "Horseman" of the title, who becomes for Jake an avenging fantasy-figure, rumoured to be hunting down Nazi war criminals across the globe. Joey is never definitively present in the novel; he exists as legend, rumour and half-remembered childhood story, precisely because he represents everything Jake feels he himself has failed to become - an unassimilated, unapologetic Jew who takes direct, physical vengeance for the Holocaust rather than merely feeling guilty about it in comfort. The psychological burden of ageing, for Jake, is inseparable from this comparison: he is growing soft and safe in London while his cousin (real or invented) rides down history's murderers, and every one of Jake's midlife anxieties - about his marriage, his career, his own cowardice - is refracted through the humiliating contrast with Joey's mythic potency.

Barney Panofsky's exile is doubled in a different way: Paris in his youth, then a return to Montreal, with occasional excursions to New York, but no sustained English chapter of the kind Jake experiences. Yet England enters *Barney's Version* obliquely, through the figure of Terry McIver, Barney's lifelong literary rival, who becomes a celebrated author partly by trading on a fraudulent history of persecution and partly by securing precisely the kind of English and international literary establishment approval that eluded Barney. McIver's memoir, which frames and needles Barney's own narrative throughout the novel, functions as a version of the English drawing-room antisemitism Jake encounters: it is the establishment's cultivated, sanctioned account of the immigrant Jewish experience, polished for outside consumption, against which Barney's own coarser, funnier, more honest version must constantly assert itself. In both novels, then, England (or the Anglo-literary establishment McIver represents) stands for a second, more genteel exile in which the Jew's acceptance is always mediated by performance, always available for revocation, and always secretly resented by the man who must perform it.

The Psychological Burdens of Ageing: Guilt, Memory and the Body

If the immigrant inheritance provides the historical ground of both novels, it is ageing itself that provides their psychological substance, and in Richler's hands guilt and haunting memory turn out to be two faces of a single condition rather than separate afflictions. *St. Urbain's Horseman* is a novel of early-middle-age crisis: Jake is not yet infirm, but he is already exhausted by the accumulated weight of expectation, professional compromise and sexual failure. Richler renders this through a fragmented, achronological structure that continually interrupts the novel's present-tense narrative with intrusive memories of childhood, adolescence and the mythologised figure of Joey, so that ageing for Jake is experienced not as linear decline but as a haunting in which the past will not stay past. His recurring courtroom fantasies, in which he imagines himself standing trial before an accusing tribunal for crimes he has not committed, dramatise a guilt so diffuse it has become free-floating, attaching itself to whatever charge happens to be nearest at hand - infidelity, cowardice, failure to avenge the Holocaust, failure to be Joey. That guilt is compounded by a still older haunting: a wartime photograph of atrocity that fixed itself in Jake's imagination as a child and has never since released him, so that the Holocaust functions in the novel less as a historical event he has studied than as an inherited hallucination, intruding on adult life at the least appropriate moments. Jake has not lived through the camps, and this is precisely his anguish: he is haunted by a memory that is not, strictly speaking, his own, inherited at one remove from a catastrophe he escaped only by the accident of his parents' earlier emigration.

Barney's Version takes this same guilt-and-haunting structure and ages it by three decades, while sharpening it into something more culpable and more formally dangerous. Barney is writing his memoir explicitly to correct the record before McIver's version becomes the only surviving account, and the reader gradually understands, through small factual slippages that his own footnotes (supplied by his son Michael) are silently correcting, that Barney is in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease even as he writes. The novel's central mystery - whether Barney is guilty of causing the disappearance of his friend Boogie, after a drunken, half-remembered confrontation at Barney's lakeside cottage - becomes, by the book's end, genuinely unanswerable even to Barney himself, because his memory can no longer certify its own contents. Where Jake's guilt is diffuse but his memory is reliable, Barney's guilt is specific but his memory is failing, so that the novel's mounting suspicion of Barney's unreliability as a narrator becomes indistinguishable from the reader's mounting awareness of his encroaching dementia; the reader can never be certain whether a given gap in Barney's account reflects guilty evasion or innocent forgetting, and Richler refuses, to the last page, to adjudicate between the two. This is Richler's most audacious formal achievement across the two novels: he has found a way to make the reader experience the ageing mind's unreliability directly, rather

than simply being told about it. Taken together, Jake's inherited, second-hand haunting and Barney's personal, culpable one dramatise a single Richlerian proposition - that for the immigrant Jew, the past is never simply over, but survives, mutated and unreliable, inside the ageing mind, so that the labour of ageing becomes indistinguishable from the labour of trying, and failing, to settle accounts with a history that will not hold still long enough to be judged.

Both novels also root their protagonists' anxieties in the ageing male body and in sexual jealousy. Jake's marriage to Nancy is under constant threat, in his own mind, from his sense of physical and moral inadequacy beside more virile, more Jewish, more dangerous men - his cousin Harry Stein above all, whose predatory sexuality both disgusts and secretly impresses him. Barney's account of his own three marriages is even more explicitly organised around sexual jealousy and physical decline: the humiliations of his second marriage, and later the loss of his third wife Miriam to Blair Hopper, represent a final, humiliating confirmation that ageing has stripped him of his last claim to potency and desirability. In both novels, then, the ageing Jewish male body becomes a site of anxiety that is inseparable from questions of ethnic and cultural adequacy: to grow old, weak or foolish is, for Jake and for Barney alike, to confirm every stereotype of Jewish unmanliness that assimilation was meant to disprove.

Comedy as Coping Mechanism

It would be a serious misreading of either novel to treat their protagonists' anxieties with unrelieved solemnity, and Richler's comic technique is itself part of his argument about ageing. Both Jake and Barney are inveterate self-mockers; both surround themselves with grotesque comic foils - Jake's cousin Harry, Barney's friend and antagonist Boogie, the entire gallery of minor Montreal characters who drift through both books trading insults, sexual boasts and Yiddish-inflected put-downs. This comedy functions as a defence mechanism against the very guilt and dread the novels otherwise dramatise: laughter becomes, for Richler's protagonists, the only available way of metabolising historical trauma and personal failure without being crushed by either. The humour of *St. Urbain's Horseman* was significant enough to warrant its own early scholarly attention: Neil Randall's study of the novel's humour, tellingly titled "Laughing at the Victim," treats Richler's comedy as bound up with cruelty and complicity rather than as simple relief, since the novel repeatedly invites the reader to laugh at characters - Harry Stein above all — whose suffering is nonetheless real (Randall 25–30). Yet Richler is unsparing about the limits of this defence. Jake's jokes cannot save his marriage or exorcise Joey's shadow; Barney's jokes cannot arrest the disease dissolving his own mind, and the novel's final chapters, in which Barney's footnoted, faltering prose gives way to

Michael's more sombre editorial voice, mark the precise point at which comedy finally fails as a coping mechanism and the reader is left with grief undisguised.

Narrative Form and the Unreliable Ageing Narrator

Critics who have written on Richler's later fiction have tended to single out *Barney's Version* as a formal departure from the rest of his output, and there is something to this claim, though it understates how much groundwork *St. Urbain's Horseman* had already laid. Richler's earlier novel is narrated in the third person, but it is a third person so thoroughly saturated in Jake's consciousness - his paranoid fantasies of trial and punishment, his half-invented mythology of Joey, his compulsive rehearsals of arguments he will never actually have - that the effect is very close to an unreliable first-person confession wearing third-person clothing. The novel's famous courtroom fantasies, in which Jake imagines himself arraigned before a tribunal of accusers, are never marked off from the "real" narrative by any formal device more emphatic than a paragraph break; the reader is left, again and again, to work out after the fact which scenes actually happened and which were staged entirely in Jake's anxious head. This blurring is itself a symptom of the psychological burden the novel describes: a mind so weighed down by inherited and invented guilt that it can no longer reliably distinguish accusation from fact.

Barney's Version takes this inherited technique and pushes it one deliberate step further by making the unreliability explicit and diegetic rather than merely atmospheric. Barney is, within the fiction, an author: he is writing these pages himself, in old age, in order to rebut a rival's memoir, and Richler surrounds his narration with the paratextual apparatus of footnotes supplied by his son Michael, correcting dates, names and sequences that Barney has garbled. As the critic Jason Blake has observed, the novel's unreliability is announced by its very title: "Barney's Version" implies that other, competing versions of these events exist, when in fact Barney's is the only testimony the reader ever receives, which is precisely what makes it impossible to verify against any independent account (Blake). This is a much bolder formal gamble than anything attempted in the earlier novel, because it turns the unreliable narrator from an effect the reader must infer into a fact the text itself insists upon, chapter by chapter, correction by correction. And yet the two techniques belong to the same imaginative family: both novels understand that to dramatise the ageing Jewish mind honestly, the novelist cannot simply describe guilt and forgetfulness from the outside, as themes to be illustrated, but must build a narrative structure in which the reader experiences, at the level of form, the same disorientation and unreliability that afflicts the protagonist. Reading *St. Urbain's Horseman* alongside *Barney's Version*, one can watch Richler discovering, refining and finally perfecting a single technical solution to a single artistic problem across the span of an entire career.

Fathers, Sons and the Failure of Transmission

A further thread binding the two novels together is their shared preoccupation with fatherhood as a site of failed or incomplete transmission. Richler's biographer Reinhold Kramer has argued that, whatever sophisticated literary structures Richler built on top of them, the foundations of his fiction were "almost always roman-à-clef" (Kramer 6), and Kramer traces a good deal of that fiction, including its recurring father-son tensions, back to Richler's own lingering resentment of his father's ineffectual role within the family. Jake Hersh worries obsessively about what he is passing on to his own children, fearing that the moral seriousness bred into him by his father's generation's suffering cannot survive translation into the comfortable, secular, Anglicised household he has built in London; his sons, he suspects, will inherit his guilt without ever having earned it through hardship of their own, so that the family's Jewishness risks becoming, within a single generation, a matter of anecdote rather than lived experience. Barney Panofsky's relationship with his own son Michael inverts this anxiety in a poignant way: it is Michael, not Barney, who ends up as the custodian and corrector of the family record, appending the footnotes that keep his father's failing memory honest and, in the novel's closing pages, effectively taking over the narration altogether once Barney's own faculties have collapsed. Where Jake fears that his children will inherit guilt without understanding, Barney's actual experience is that his son inherits the burden of literally curating and completing his father's story - a burden the novel presents with tenderness rather than resentment, as if to suggest that this, finally, is what the transmission of Jewish memory across generations in the diaspora has come to: not heroic vengeance of the kind fantasised in Joey Hersh's legend, but the quieter, more modern heroism of a son patiently annotating his father's failing recollections so that some version of the truth survives him.

Conclusion: Two Panels of a Single canvas.

Read as thematic twins, *St. Urbain's Horseman* and *Barney's Version* trace a single arc of Jewish immigrant ageing across two novels written a generation apart. Jake Hersh, at thirty-seven, is a man still capable of flight, of self-justification, of imagining an alternative, more heroic self in the mythic figure of Joey the Horseman; his crisis is one of guilt and comparison. Barney Panofsky, nearly thirty years older within the fictional chronology and appearing in a novel published twenty-six years after Jake's story, has no such alternative self left to imagine: his crisis is one of dissolution, in which memory, marriage, friendship and finally identity itself are eroded by time and disease. Between them, the two novels chart the full trajectory of what it meant, for Richler, to be a Jewish man born of immigrant poverty on St Urbain Street, to succeed in the wider Anglophone world of Canada and England, and to discover that success purchased

no immunity from either the moral debts of history or the ordinary, universal catastrophe of growing old. It is this doubled inheritance - the specific, historical burden of the immigrant Jew and the general, human burden of ageing - that makes Richler's two great late-career and mid-career novels not merely companion pieces but genuine thematic twins, born of the same imaginative family and ageing, as their protagonists do, together.

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