

Of Self, Temporal Cubism, and Metaphor: Mordecai Richler's *St. Urbain's Horseman*

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Among the contributions to the 1974 winter issue of *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, the reader was pleasantly impressed to encounter David Sheps's article on *St. Urbain's Horseman* by Mordecai Richler.¹ The publication of this essay was welcome indeed, for it focused interest on a novel which in spite of its unanimously recognized accomplishments and significance has only minimally been the object of critical investigation so far. Though primarily concerned with the theme of the vicarious, the study calls attention to the complexity of the structure underlying Richler's work. The present essay would like to continue where Mr. Sheps has voluntarily stopped, and make fully explicit the major structural characteristic of *St. Urbain's Horseman*, i.e., the selection of the temporal element as the basic psychological and methodological principle.

The major premise of Richler's novel is that the concept of the self is inseparable from the concept of time, that both man's organic and his psychological development is predicated on time. The author's approach is also based on the observation that the time of human experience is different from the concept of time in nature; one major distinction being the fact that events of real importance for the psyche do not follow in a systematic chronological order, but enjoy an unequal distribution within a span of time objectively measured. However, what might be called the discontinuous in terms of clocks and calendars is the psychologically continuous, for apparently disparate events converge towards the unique point of the momentary experience, and what happens to a man in one particular instant of his life is in resonance with what has already happened to him at other different times. Between moments of life, the mind identifies a fundamental sameness, and recognizes in it its own existence unfolding in time; hence, a memory formed not by habit, but one consisting of significant events, discloses the coherent structure of the self which cannot be recovered if only present experience is considered. Richler in quest of Jake Hersh's self is therefore in quest of his memory, and, indeed, with the exception of a few pages dedicated to the trial and narrated by the author, *St. Urbain's Horseman* consists of Jake's recollections in connection with this important occurrence in his life.²

In Richler's novel however, not only memories are ascribed a special function in the search for the self. The fantasies and metaphors constituting the structural landmarks of a person's imagination are also outstandingly relevant psychological data, for they refer to a preeminently value-charged aspect of subjective existence. And if "the Horseman" as a metaphor is Jake Hersh's leading statement of identity, Richler considers his responsibility not only to mention its presence, but also to account for the manner in which it was produced.

But how can this constant resonance between memory, imagination, and momentary experience be conveyed? Richler's solution to the problem is simple but brilliant: he uses temporal cubism. The author places himself in one particular moment in the life of his protagonist, and, by means of his protagonist's recollections, allows the reader to view the central event from a

large number of points of temporal perspective. In other words, what a cubist painter does with space, Richler does with time. Indeed, he spatializes the present by making it the point of confluence of incidents which exhibit dynamic association and interpenetration, precisely the qualities which are significant for the relationship between time and the self. Temporal cubism, therefore, is designed to catch this dynamic interaction of events in a formalized system, i.e., to reveal at once the co-presence of temporal elements in the making up of the self, and the functional unity of the psyche. Accordingly, Richler's protagonist is not a fixed structure, nor is he a passive recorder, but a constant interpreter, organizer, and synthesizer. He is a distinct pattern of responses and associations called Jake Hersh.

Jake Hersh is a Jew from Montreal, and what might be termed the Jewish component of his psyche emerges from the exploration of a number of incidents chronologically disconnected. As a child living in Canada at the time of the Second World War, he has first hand experience of anti-Semitic discrimination on the part of certain French Canadians. As an adolescent travelling to America, he is informed that some of the Nazis responsible for the Jewish holocaust are still in office in West Germany. These incidents stored in the deep layers of his mental soil render him particularly sensitive to the terrible realities disclosed years later by the Frankfurt proceedings against Nazi criminals, and Jake Hersh finds himself walking in the streets of Munich seized with the desire to shout: "Murderers, murderers."³ Yet, he is well enough read and educated to remember that Kant, Mozart, and Brecht are German names, and therefore to feel obliged to weigh the contribution brought to the world by some Germans against the abnormalities committed by others. So, on one hand, he concludes that hatred being a matter of discipline "he would have to train harder" and hate, and on the other, sees sense in the statement of a young American girl that the Germans are excellent people, and that Germany is the right country for her (p. 245).

When the German problem does not constitute a point of reference, Jake Hersh's emotional response to his own race is also dual in nature. While admitting, for instance, that a measure of unity was necessary for the Jews in Montreal in order to survive as a minority under conditions of anti-Semitism, he resents profoundly the absurdly clannish attitude exhibited by the Hershes, and, though he does not cherish the illusion that anti-Semitic sentiments have disappeared from the world, he considers that the time has come to fight them not by building higher walls around the ghetto, but by pulling them down and meeting the rest of humanity. This is why he rejoices when the state of Israel wins the Six Day War, yet sincerely worries about Arab civil rights in the same country.

Of equal importance for the reconstruction of Jake Hersh's self are the temporal angles from which the building of his social consciousness is considered. Again, the events which Richler chooses to present are disparate and disconnected chronologically, yet again, they function as resonant elements for the present, for they too obey the logic of significant associations. Very early in his childhood Jake witnesses social discrimination and injustice in his own family. The following years supply him with manifold information regarding the millions of oppressed people in the world, and, on one occasion, a *Time* editorial even confronts him with the undisputable proclamation: "While you're eating your dinner tonight, 417 people will die of starvation" (p. 356). As a result, when he finally shoots his first film, the happiness produced by this dream come true is severely marred by his awareness that "the energy he and others had expended, the one million two hundred thousand dollars they had consumed, could have been used much more beneficially providing shelter for the homeless, food for the hungry" (p. 272).

At this point, it is extremely important to notice that Jake Hersh's sense of Jewishness and his social consciousness are inextricably connected. What Jake calls his "Jewish nightmare"—"the terror that took him by surprise"—significantly struck "only on those rare evenings when he brimmed with well being," or, equally, when he spent happy moments with his family on the beach of their rented cottage (p. 65). It is at these particular moments that he fears his happiness endangered by all the "injustice collectors" in the world, by all the insulted and the injured, who come to ask him for an accounting (p. 81). And if he imagines this general attack under the form of Nazi tactics, it is because only then his Jewish background manifests itself. The importance of the word "only" in Richler's text cannot be emphasized enough, for it is this word and its implications that raise his work from Jewish parochialism into human universality. Indeed, *St. Urbain's Horseman* does not depict a Jewish experience, but the experience of a man who happens to be a Jew. Jake Hersh's fear is a general fear expressed through a Canadian-Jewish particular, and Richler's art pulls the reader away from any specific context and towards the center of the experience itself.

Jake Hersh's traumas and perplexities are undoubtedly those of everyman; yet, unlike some people, unlike his friend Luke Scott, for instance, who has concluded that the whole world being on the Titanic, the only question is in which class one travels down, Jake is basically an idealist with a profoundly humanistic outlook on life. At a time when his contemporaries find it difficult to believe in anything, he believes in "those who were truly great, those who were nearer the sun" (p. 283). His resistance to a meaningless existence, his desperate attempt to establish consistency and significance in a life which apparently lacks both these qualities is made explicit by "the Horseman," the metaphor which embodies not only his wish to emancipate himself from a limiting sense of Jewishness, but also his desire for social and political justice.

But to find a metaphor is no more than to extricate an aspect of one's true self from impression into expression. As such, "the Horseman" constitutes an irreducible essence of Jake's personality, and in order to reveal its gradual construction, Richler again relies heavily on temporal cubism. Three events seem to be of particular importance. First, the initial impression which goes back to the year 1943, when, due to a number of circumstances, Jake singles out his cousin Joey as exactly the opposite of what he considers hateful in the rest of the Hershes: success, adventure, and action, as opposed to petty humbleness, clannish immobility, and passive acceptance. The next important event occurs when Jake is informed that his cousin was in Spain in 1939, and when in spite of warnings that Joey was, in fact, running away from troubles with American gangsters, he persuades himself that his cousin actually fought in the Spanish Civil War. The third and decisive moment takes place when Jake discovers Joey's temporary stay in Israel, and when, despite the disturbing facts regarding Joey's conduct, he again chooses to believe only that his cousin fought in the battle for Jerusalem, and that he eventually left the country because it no longer corresponded to his ideal. At this point a profound relationship is established between Joey as an external object and Jake's consciousness. Jake recognizes equivalence, and, through a mimetic operation, creates "the Horseman," Joey's spiritualized equivalent.⁴ The metaphor thus discovered grasps Jake fully. Not only does it become his moral editor, but also, potentially, his supreme adviser. "Oh, Horseman, Horseman, where are you?" Jake Hersh will often inquire, craving for answers and certainties (p. 282).

When a metaphor is created, the human being rises beyond the object which originated it, and substitutes its ideal image. Unfortunately, Jake's spiritual motion does not pause in that stage, but descends back to the object and identifies it with the metaphor itself. From Joey to the Horseman, and back to Joey is the itinerary followed by his mind, and this heresy is signalled by Richler through the use of both purely linguistic and other artistic devices. Preceding the word "Horseman" with the qualifying "St. Urbain's" he coins the phrase "St. Urbain's Horseman" designating Joey, in opposition to "the Horseman" denominating the metaphor, and simultaneously uses Jake's attic aerie as a literary notation for the abused ideal image. Indeed, the attic aerie is a shrine Jake builds not to "the Horseman," but to "St. Urbain's Horseman," not to the metaphor, but to the cousin. Here the walls are covered by photographs retrieved from Joey's file, and here he stores Joey's papers, riding habit, and saddle. It is also here that the clock on the wall indicates the time in Paraguay, Doctor Mengele's time, for by the same descending movement of the spirit by which he identified Joey as *the* here, Jake singled out this former Nazi doctor as *the* villain. And his obsession with Mengele is of such profusion, that nothing can persuade him of the absurdity of the idea that once the Nazi doctor is punished, justice is done for all his concentration camp victims. As a result, whenever he thinks of his cousin, he imagines him doing what he would like him to do: riding a Pleven stallion, for, "when a Jew gets on a horse he stops being a Jew," galloping, thundering, and punishing Mengele (p. 31). In fact, Jake's desire to cling to this image of Joey is so fervent, that he systematically disregards all evidence that could be detrimental to it, till he finally reaches the point that the less satisfaction he experiences in his life, the more he thinks and talks about his cousin.

Certainly, the legitimate question is, why this almost insane belief in a man despite all evidence, and despite the fact that in his lucid moments Jake himself has the realization that his adventure with "St. Urbain's Horseman" is leading him to ruin? The painful truth is that Jake needs his idealized cousin, for, while he is fundamentally right in his social and political perceptions, he is essentially weak when concrete action is needed. Torn between disgust of the system and desire to belong to it, Jake Hersh is able to pass hard judgments, but is unable to act accordingly. And it is this very incapacity that obliges him to use Joey as his self-justifying image: to have him exhibit attitudes he himself should exhibit, to have him perform acts he himself should perform. Jake himself admits this terrible flaw in his character, and is fully aware that his complacency renders him a mere provider like any of his despised uncles, that in the absence of a serious commitment, his life is "ultimately self-serving and cocooned by money" (p. 81). Indeed, even when he attempts to live up to his own expectations, the most he can do is not to go on a trip to Spain because the Spanish government has fascist inclinations, or, as a director, consort not with leading actors, but with has-beens and never-beens.

Nowhere, however, is his inconsistency rendered more evident than in what might be called his cinema-fantasies. Unreal as far as actual performance is concerned, these acts of imagination are highly realistic psychologically, for they represent an enormous condensation of time and experience. Outstanding among them is the fantasy in which Jake casts his own funeral. In attendance are his wife, his best friend, and his two children. Most characteristically, Molly is married to a Black Panther, but Sammy is Lord Samuel Hersh with a mansion in Belgravia. Jake's desire for social justice is therefore satisfied, for his daughter has espoused one of the most discriminated against minorities; but the comforts of the establishment are there too, for his son is well-off and an aristocrat in addition. The reader remembers a moment, distant in

time, yet succinctly advancing Richler's own comment on the dualities disputing Jake's frame of mind. Jake and Harry are drinking; Jake hopefully suspects himself of social integrity, but Harry reassures him in a friendly fashion: "Don't worry. You're rotten" (p. 350).

After the various dislocations of the time sequence throughout the novel, one observes the final actions of the story unrolling in their chronological order, till the moment comes when Jake Hersh is informed of the death of his cousin. The moment is crucial, for not only does Jake experience a profound depression, but also feels the moral obligation to become "St. Urbain's Horseman" himself, if the idea of "the Horseman" is to endure. But this is precisely what he cannot, or will not do, and, in view of what the author has already disclosed about his past, Jake's next movement is at once retrospective and prospective. Like a drowning man clinging to a straw, Jake clings to his aunt's refusal to believe in the death of her son, and though fully aware of the absurdity of his attitude, climbs to his attic aerie, retrieves "the Horseman's journal," and replaces the entry regarding Joey's death with the words: "presumed dead" (p. 436). The circle is thus completed, and Jake Hersh is left there where he was found in the first chapter: journeying between his bedroom and his attic aerie, oscillating between the symbol of a system he thinks he hates, and that of an ideal he is unable to pursue. The initial moment of the book revealed him waking up; the final one discloses him going back to sleep, and then, what Richler calls "stock-taking time" has come for the reader.

The book is closed with the conviction that Mordecai Richler's work represents a notable contribution to the discovery and understanding of the self, and that the structure which the author designed for his novel reflects the idea that time being an irradicable factor in the universal condition of life, a temporal index must necessarily enter into the study of man. Indeed, what one commonly calls the self is experienced only against the background of the individual's life, a life defined not only as an objective structure of temporal movements, but also as a subjective associative network. In order to capture this plurality of aspects, the significance of which consists only in its totality, Richler uses a method analogous to space perspective. His temporal cubism discloses Jake Hersh's personality not as a sum total of past impressions, but as the result of a process of interpenetration whose essence is illuminated by "the Horseman," the denominating metaphor. And if the greatest part of the novel happens in Jake Hersh's memory, it is because Richler is aware that the unified structure of the self, inaccessible if the individual is observed only in a momentary manifestation, can be restored through recollections. But the Canadian author is not imitating Proust. Jake's trial is not Marcel's biscuit and cup of tea. Having triggered memories, it does not disappear, and the book does not move backwards. On the contrary, the trial is the extensive present of the novel, and into this present the past is summoned to render it intelligible.

NOTES

¹David Sheps, "Waiting for Joey: the Theme of the Vicarious in *St. Urbain's Horseman*," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 3, 1 (Winter, 1974), 83-92.

²A succinct, but expert discussion of the role played by memory in the restoration of the self, and its treatment in literature can be found in Hans Meyerhoff, *Time in Literature* (Berkeley; University of California Press, 1960), pp. 26-54.

³Mordecai Richler, *St. Urbain's Horseman* (Toronto; Bantam Books, 1971), p. 245. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

⁴For a perceptive rendering of the mental processes which account for the creation of metaphors, consult Georges Poulet, *Studies in Human Time* (Baltimore; Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), pp. 303-315.