REVALUING MORDECAI RICHLER

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There are two Mordecai Richlers known to the reading public. One is the literary personality who wears several hats: the aging *enfant terrible* of the Saturday supplements; the sardonic sharpshooter taking aim at juicy targets like the Jewish resorts in the Catskills; the visiting lecturer whose salutary attacks on the parochialism of the Canadian literary scene have become dulled through repetition; the Book-of-the-Month Club editor writing fatuous paeans to tawdry best sellers. The other Mordecai Richler is the serious novelist, the author of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and six other novels. It is this Richler who wrote in 1970 that "I deplore the writer as a personality, however large and undoubted the talent,"[1] and who, one imagines, must be embarrassed by the sometimes meretricious uses to which undoubted talent has been put by his alter ego.

Over the years, in interviews and articles, Richler has from time to time talked about his informing concerns as a writer of serious fiction. Two of them will come as no surprise even to casual readers. One is the-way-it-was impulse: no matter where he makes his home, Richler feels "forever rooted in Montreal's St. Urbain St. That was my time, my place, and I have elected myself to get it right" ("Why I Write," p. 19). The other may be called the satirical impulse; it is pointed up in Richler's comment that he is especially interested in criticizing "the things I believe in or I'm attached to" — liberal values, Jews, Canada.[2] A third concern may be called humane; in 1971 Richler said that running through all his novels, but grasped by almost nobody, was the persistent attempt "to make a case for the ostensibly unsympathetic man" (Cameron, p. 117). And in another place he spoke of "the writer as a kind of loser's advocate."[3] But what Richler has most consistently emphasized about his work is its moral basis. For him the novelist's task is "fundamentally a moral one"; unlike the commercial writer, the serious writer is "within a

[1]"Why I Write," *Shovelling Trouble* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972), p. 19.
[2]"Mordecai Richler: The Reticent Moralist," in Donald Cameron, ed., *Conversations with Canadian Novelists*, vol. 2 (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p. 117.
[3]Graeme Gibson, ed., *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 271.

moral tradition" (Gibson, p. 271). As early as the 1956 interview with Nathan Cohen, the young Richler spoke (in Hemingwayesque cadences) of the search for "values with which in this time a man can live with honour" and of his compulsion "to say what I feel about values and about people living in a time when to my mind there is no agreement about values."[4] In 1971 he again emphasized that "from the very beginning, in a faltering way" he had been "most engaged . . . with values, and with honour. I would say I'm a moralist, really" (Cameron, p. 124).

The extent to which Richler has realized his declared intentions and the degree to which he has been able to make them complement one another are appropriate gauges for a critical assessment of his four principal novels. (I take no account of *The Incomparable Atuk* [1963] and of what have been nicely called Richler's two first novels, *The Acrobats* [1954] and *Son of a Smaller Hero* [1955].)[5] One must first add, however, that there is another important determinant of Richler's fiction, of which the author himself, as well as his commentators (except for Graeme Gibson in certain penetrating pages of his interview with Richler) seem largely unaware, and which certainly does work at cross purposes with the other concerns of his fiction. I speak of a certain deconstructive energy which at times tends to undermine Richler's constructive concerns as a satirist and moralist, a de-moralizing force which it is hard not to regard as being rooted in a dark negating vision of human existence. When this force is present only weakly or recessively, it tends to manifest itself in episodes and emphases that seem tasteless and gratuitous, like Virgil's magazine for health handicappers in *Duddy Kravitz,* or the pedophiliac pedagogy of Miss Ryerson in *Cocksure,* who combines traditional educational principles with a new-found taste for consuming the male member (to borrow Spooner's phrase from Pinter's *No Man's Land).* Some commentators have rightly noted how these and other gross vignettes have weakened the serious satiric, humane and moral concerns of Richler's fiction. But what has not been sufficiently noticed is that when Richler's deconstructive energy, however subversive of his conscious intentions as a novelist, is strongly present, the result is

[4]Nathan Cohen, "A Conversation with Mordecai Richler," reprinted in G. David Sheps, ed., *Mordecai Richler* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1971), pp. 38, 29.
[5]Hugo McPherson, "Fiction 1940-1960," in Carl F. Klinck, ed., *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 713.

arguably the most imaginatively exciting and compelling passages in his fiction.

Richler once explained that his novels "break down into two categories readily. There are the naturalistic novels and the straight satires. . . . I guess my ultimate interest is in the novel of character really."[6] This terminology is unfortunate: "the novel of character" is useful enough, but the other two designations are misleading. Properly speaking, none of Richler's novels is either naturalistic or a straight satire. The former is presumably meant to cover books like *A Choice of Enemies* and *St. Urbain's Horseman,* which are realistic in setting and technique, moral in theme, and in which a central figure comes into conflict with himself and with aspects of his society in ways whereby character and values are explored. By the latter term Richler doubtless meant to designate *The Incomparable Atuk* and *Cocksure.* The first of these is a satirical entertainment which collapses into farce; much of the content of the second is satiric: but neither is formally speaking a satire.

In any event, recognition of generic differences among Richler's novels is not more critically important than recognition of their thematic and presentational similarities. Take, for example, the "naturalistic" *A Choice of Enemies* (1957), and *Cocksure* (1968), a "straight satire." Norman Price and Mortimer Griffin, the central characters of each novel, both live in London and are professionally connected with the city's artistic and creative worlds. Both are Canadian WASPS of good family; both have in the past acquitted themselves with distinction on the battlefield, a heroism associated with the traditional conservative values of their upbringing. In the present, however, such values have come to seem vestigial, what the earlier novel calls "the fossil[s] of a sillier age, like the player-piano." Both Norman and Mortimer have come to espouse enlightened liberal values and to move in like-minded left-wing circles. In *A Choice of Enemies* the circle is the *emigré* North American political liberals who were in Spain and consorted with Communism during the 1930s but find themselves increasingly at bay during the reactionary 1950s; in *Cocksure* it is the swinging liberals of the 1960s, with their flaunted sexual liberation and radical chic.

Unlike the other members of their circles, Norman and Mortimer are liberals of the best traditional sort: undoctrinaire, hypersensitive of

[6]John Metcalf, "Black Humour: Interview with Mordecai Richler," *Journal of Canadian Fiction,* 3, 1 (1974), 73.

conscience, self-questioning. In each novel, events come to undermine the foundations of each character's enlightened values, a destabilization influenced in each case by Jewish shadow figures, Karp in *A Choice of Enemies,* Shalinsky in *Cocksure.* As the sands shift under them, Norman and Mortimer both become at odds with their liberal friends, whose communal beliefs are shown to have become solidified into a new orthodoxy, conformist rather than openminded, intolerant rather than humane. As a result of the clash between individual and group, both become increasingly isolated, ineffectual and value-less; and both finally come to a bad end.

A Choice of Enemies is an intelligent, inventive and rather undervalued novel, on the whole a stronger and more engaging, though a much less professionally polished performance than *Cocksure.* Of course the technical and stylistic crudities irritate (Richler was still only in his mid-twenties when the novel was published); the point of view jumps around unnecessarily, especially in the opening chapters; the prose calls rather too much attention to itself; there are some much too explicit passages of thematic summary (though it is fair to say that this is a weakness Richler has never chosen to overcome). And there are much more serious flaws: the two clinkers in the plot, Norman's amnesia and Ernst's murder of Norman's brother (the latter inessential to plot or theme in the first place and in addition necessitating a one-chance-in-a-million coincidence); and the badly fudged confrontation scene between Norman and Ernst.

But these infelicities are more than compensated for by the strengths of the novel: the group portrait of the blacklisted writers, directors and producers; the subtlety and depth of the characterization of Norman Price (he is, for instance, shown to have a non-*emigré* feel for London life that is an index of his superior sensibility, just as other incidents are indicative of his finer conscience); and there are other strong characterizations that help to dramatize the complexities of liberal humanism and the search for necessarily non-absolute values.

But what finally remains most vividly in the memory concerning *A Choice of Enemies* is its dark negating vision, which ultimately leaves shattered the novel's humane and moral concerns. It is of course possible to read *A Choice of Enemies* in such a way as to discern the constructive moral seriousness and the positive conclusion which are for some critics the hallmarks of an artistically successful

fiction and the substance of their critical discourse. Take, for example, Bruce Stovel's introduction to the New Canadian Library edition of the novel. Stovel finds at the end of *A Choice of Enemies* a positive conclusion to Norman Price's "apprenticeship": he "fights his way back to an honest self-scrutiny, to a separate peace, to a determination to struggle for success in his marriage and his work."[7] But what I find is a worn out, morally numbed man passively sinking into a marital limbo with a shallow, opportunistic and ugly wife; in the novel's final sentences, Norman's mind plays host to an utterly banal thought while he pours himself a stiffer drink.

This demoralizing conclusion is hardly unprepared for: in the stories of three other characters in *A Choice of Enemies* the black hole into which Norman Price falls is prefigured. There is Charlie Lawson, the Canadian hack writer, a self-pitying loser and emotional slob. He and his long suffering wife are given an uplifting reconciliation scene, but it is so maudlin and soap-operaish ("we could make a fresh start"; "how vulnerable we both are"; "help me to live") as to be cloying rather than cleansing — a hack scene for a hack writer. Distaste hardens into revulsion when near the end of the novel, having made it in Toronto as he never could in London, Charlie is seen on a Canadian television screen mouthing nationalist platitudes about "our gifted poets." There is Sally, the high-minded North American innocent who has come to London seeking romance and adventure but ends up a kept woman spending her days with phenobarbitol, gin, double features, and sleeping pills. She dies from an overdose of the last at the same time that her absent sugar daddy, a dissimulator, an adulterer and a liberal, who hopes to talk her into an abortion, gets sloppily drunk while thickly insisting "I'm a humanist. . . . I believe that human life is sacred. That was and still is my position." And finally there is Karp, the concentration camp survivor, who with his grotesque appearance, wrenching memories, repugnant habits, and psychotic disposition — "The best ones were killed, Karp," Norman shouts at him, "Only the conniving, evil ones like you survived" — stands, like Bernanos' Monsieur Ouine, as a powerful image of an obscene spiritual void beyond the reach of humane or moral concerns.

This deconstructive power is also present in *Cocksure,* and it has not gone unremarked by Leslie Fiedler, who describes the novel as

[7]*A Choice of Enemies,* Intro. Bruce Stovel, New Canadian Library No. 136 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977), p. xiv.

"a book which seems always on the verge of becoming truly obscene, but stops short, alas, at the merely funny."[8] The black humour strain in *Cocksure* is principally found in one of the novel's two narrative lines: that involving Richler's most fantastic invention, the Star Maker, the malign demiurge of the film industry who aspires to divine status through self-reproduction, who is destroying humane literary values, and who — in the high point of the novel's dark exuberance — recalls how Jewish Hollywood entrepreneurs of the 1930s came to perfect the manufacture of handsome WASP robots for the screen, mechanical images of desire for the masses.

But as Fiedler intimates, this strain does not infect all of *Cocksure,* which in its other narrative line is in the main content to be not blackly comic or absurdist but wickedly funny about a number of the excesses of contemporary programmatic liberalism. But while *Cocksure* is not on the one hand a black farce (though with elements of such which at times approach the obscene), it is not on the other hand a satire because it does not imply a standard of values against which deviations and perversions can be measured. Indeed, one of the few ways in which the Canadianness of *Cocksure* might be pointed up is to note that while the American Leslie Fiedler was complaining that its obscenity was intermittent, the English critics Philip Toynbee and John Wain were complaining about the work's unsatisfactoriness as satire: the former could not "detect the moral platform on which Mr. Richler is standing and from which his darts are launched"; the latter noted that Richler "lashes out without having a definite place to lash out from — all these modern absurdities are ridiculed, but in the name of what?"[13]

In its failure to be neither fish nor fowl *Cocksure* ultimately disappoints as a serious work of fiction. One reason why the castigation of contemporary mores part of the novel does not solidify into a satire is clear: the inconsistent treatment of Mortimer Griffin, the central character. Mortimer is alternately a target of the satire and, as both naif and reliquary of traditional values, the lens by which the objects of satire are focused. The gap between Mortimer's penile chart on the one hand and his Victoria Cross on the other is enormous and no attempt is made to bridge it.

The reasons why the "obscene" tendencies of *Cocksure* keep

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[8]"Some Notes on the Jewish Novel in English," reprinted in Sheps, 105.
[9]Philip Toynbee, "Cocksure," reprinted in Sheps, 108; John Wain, "Puppeteers," *New York Review* (22 August, 1968), p. 34.

collapsing back into the "merely funny" are less apparent, but I can offer one hypothesis. It has to do with Richler's growing fixation with gamy sexuality (it is even more pronounced in *St. Urbain's Horseman).* This fixation is insufficiently assimilated into the texture and themes of *Cocksure,* and its instances remain rather gross adhesions to the text. George Woodcock relates these features "to the world of sexual fantasy and bawdy jokes that beguiles adolescent boys" and lets the matter go at that.[10] But the fact that part of Richler's imagination seems arrested at the level of the highschool lavatory wall is an important matter. One is not arguing that his imagination is tainted by preoccupations he should have outgrown and that he should clean up his act. One's complaint is exactly the opposite: that Richler has been too genteel to allow the lewd and the gross fully to possess his imaginative processes, come what may. To do so might lead to a discomforting shifting of the sands for a writer habituated to satirical and moral themes; but it might also be salutary. On the one hand it might lead to their transformation into the truly obscene; on the other it might be liberating and allow Richler finally to overcome one of his most serious weaknesses as a writer of realistic fiction: his self-confessed inability (as pronounced as Hemingway's) to create convincing female characters. In any event unless some imaginative transformation of these fixations occurs, one will continue to be tempted to apply to Richler Irving Howe's comment on Philip Roth: that his is "a creative vision deeply marred by vulgarity."[11]

All of *Cocksure* was written in one of the interstices in the composition of *St. Urbain's Horseman* (1971), the long-gestating novel that should have been Richler's major achievement to date. The novel gives evidence everywhere of technical maturity and full stylistic control, and combines the subjects, themes and modes of Richler's earlier novels in ways that suggest — as does the high seriousness of its epigraph — that Richler was attempting a cumulative fictional statement of his views on the mores and values of contemporary man. But while *St. Urbain's Horseman* is a solid success on the level of superior fictional entertainment, on the level of serious fiction it must be reckoned a considerable disappointment.

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[10]*Mordecai Richler* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1971), p. 50.

[11]"Philip Roth Reconsidered," *The Critical Point: On Literature and Culture* (New York: Horizon Press, 1973), p. 155.

It doesn't deliver the goods and simply does not merit the kind of detailed exegesis it has been given by some Canadian critics.[12]

The center of the novel is a crisis point in the life of Jake Hersh, a successful thirty-seven year old "alienated Jew. Modishly ugly" with a "gorgeous wife" and three children. A Canadian living in London and connected with the city's artistic worlds, of liberal convictions and sensitive conscience, Jake is clearly meant to be the definitive portrait, this time Jewish, of the Norman Price/Mortimer Griffin figure. There are two generic components of Jake's crisis: (*a*) the advent of the mid-life crunch (Samuel Johnson is cited in this regard), which is triggered by a sense of professional unfillment and intimations of mortality; (*b*) the cumulative malaise of Jake's "American generation" — "Always the wrong age. Ever observers, never participants. The whirlwind elsewhere" — with its attendant feelings of guilt (Jake even feels a "burden of responsibility" over enjoying a "singularly happy marriage"). Both of these components are called attention to throughout the novel and are rather too neatly summarized in the long last chapter of its third part. (Another component of Jake's crisis, the quandaries of a Canadian artist of his generation, is developed only briefly and drops from sight about a third of the way through the book.)

In his crisis Jake fails to navigate successfully between the Scylla and Charybdis of his voyage into middle age. One rock is the repellent Harry Stein, a first-division injustice collector who is a striking variation on the Karp/Shalinsky figure. The other is Jake's older cousin Joey, a mysterious figure who seems nothing more than a migrant petty criminal but whom Jake recreates in the image of his need as a figure of heroism, even of transcendence — a "graven image" of possibility without which, even after Joey's death is reported at the end of the novel, Jake cannot live.

The thematic skeleton of *St. Urbain's Horseman* is, then, solid and substantial; it is in its incarnation that the weakness of the novel lies. Everything depends on the presentation of Jake, especially of his mental life and the deeper reaches of his character, and on the intensity of the reader's sympathetic involvement with him. Unfortunately Jake is characterized rather too superficially. One is told, for example, but never shown, that he is charged with contradictions concerning his professional life; and for all the time

[12]Most recently in John Moss's essay, "Richler's Horseman," in John Moss, ed., *The Canadian Novel: Here and Now* (Toronto: NC Press, 1978), pp. 156-65.

devoted to what is going on in his head he doesn't really seem to have much of a mental life. Despite the big issues he is said to be struggling with, *St. Urbain's Horseman* can hardly claim serious attention as a novel of ideas. There are a number of interesting similarities of theme, presentation and subject matter between Richler's novel and Saul Bellow's marvelous comic novel of ideas, *Herzog*. But any kind of comparison between the two recreations of the mid-life crisis of a representative contemporary man can only cause Richler's novel to shrink into relative insignificance.

Another serious shortcoming is that Jake is treated with too much indulgence. I do not mean to say that he is idealized. It is of course true that he is shown to be drolly neurotic, irrationally insecure, resentful, and ignoble; and he is not spared the demeaning affliction of "a cherry-sized hemorrhoid." But on the whole Richler seems to have assumed that Jake's sensitivities, difficulties, needs, and muddled liberal values are so inherently appealing and widely shared that only a few broad strokes — slipping a secret-agent message into his son's notebook, obsession with the Holocaust, loyally employing down-and-outers for his film crews, reacting as he does to Mount and Foot Society paintings shown him by Mrs. Ormsby Fletcher — will suffice to secure the reader's sympathetic involvement.

Richler does indirectly try to supply Jake with a dark underside, but he is unsuccessful in giving the reader a convincing sense of the twisted self within. When at the end of the anti-climactic Old Bailey trial (shades of Leon Uris' *QB VII*) the judge asks "How in God's name could you form an association with Stein in the first place?" Jake makes no reply but the reader is meant to know the answer: that Harry Stein is Jake's *Doppelgänger,* the objectification of his darker self, and that this secret affinity, as much as Jake's guilt feelings over his worldly success, is the bond between them. But the reader can make this connection merely cerebrally. The Harry Stein within Jake remains unknown and unfelt.

Another important point is that while Jake's story is the single narrative line in *St. Urbain's Horseman,* it in fact takes up only about half the novel's pages. The rest of the material, related only tangentially to his *crise,* is crisply deployed and excellent as entertainment, but its very abundance tends ultimately to work against the novel's serious aspirations and keep it at the level of what Roger Sale calls "a raconteur's story, shaggy and timed, incapable of

testing anything."[13] The best known of the novel's self-contained bits (they were in fact separately published as short stories) have English settings: the dinner with Ormsby-Fletcher and the Sunday softball game on Hampstead Heath. But most of the sketches and episodes relate to Jake's Jewish Montreal background: the scenes involving his mother, Herky, Hanna, and Jenny, and the splendid sad/funny chapter describing the Hersh family's week-long mourning for Issy, Jake's father. It is true that the seed of Jake's adult fascination with the Horseman was sown in his St. Urbain Street adolescence when, seeking to shape an identity for himself in opposition to his stifling family world, he first becomes Joey's advocate. But since the subject of *St. Urbain's Horseman* is the quandaries of a Jew who has made it out of the ghetto and into the larger world, and not the story of a Jew who is trying to make it, the recreation of the St. Urbain Street world, the particular time and place that Richler has elected himself to get right, does not become an integral part of the novel and does not intensify the novel's exploration of mores and morals.

The Jewish Montreal world is of course an integral part of Richler's best novel, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959), which is the story of a Jewish boy's making it. But however memorable, *Duddy Kravitz* is hardly a masterpiece. Published when Richler was only twenty-eight, the novel is rough-hewn in style, technique and characterization. The chapter in *St. Urbain's Horseman* describing the mourning for Issy Hersh, for example, is a much more effective realization of Richler's time and place than anything in the earlier work. Indeed, it is hard not to think it unfortunate that the novel did not come to Richler at a later stage of his career, when his talents had matured and he was fully in control of them. Had this been the case the story of Duddy Kravitz might have been able to withstand comparison with, say, V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas;* as it stands, however, it is different neither in kind nor degree from novels like Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?*

At first glance *Duddy Kravitz* looks like a naturalistic novel which dispassionately studies the determining influence of environment on character. But one soon discovers that the naturalistic elements in the story of Duddy's apprenticeship are overlaid by a clear-cut moral pattern. The novel's opening section, told largely from the point of view of Mr. McPherson, details Duddy's cruel harassment of his

[13]"What Went Wrong?", *New York Review* (21 October 1971), p. 4.

ineffectual teacher, which culminates in Mrs. McPherson's death and her husband's going irreversibly to pieces. Duddy is clearly responsible for the McPhersons' tragedy, though one does tend to let him off easily: he is only a teenager, after all, and could not have foreseen the grim results of his actions. During the course of the novel Duddy is given the opportunity to accept responsibility for what he has done and, through Yvette's love and Virgil's friendship, to grow into a responsible, other-regarding person and to cultivate non-acquisitive values. But Duddy can rise only to the moral level of Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* (who thought she could be a good woman if she had five thousand a year): "All I needed was to be born rich. All I needed was money in the crib and I would have grown up such a fine lovable guy. A kidder. A regular prince among men. God damn it to hell, he thought, why was I born the son of a dope." At the end of his novel Duddy cruelly betrays Yvette and Virgil. His grandfather's condemnation of his conduct reinforces the reader's, and makes it clear that while Duddy's apprenticeship has culminated in material success, it has also ended in human and moral failure.

Much of the critical comment on *Duddy Kravitz* praises the novel for its mixture of slice-of-life realism (an authentically observed time and place) and serious moral concern.[14] But I would myself argue that the world of the novel is marred by presentational crudities (including reliance on stereotype and caricature) which are not wholly made up for by the powerful characterization of Max, Duddy's father, and by the fresh invention of the Marxist Bar-Mitzvah film. I would further suggest that the moral pattern is rather too schematic and clear cut, is hardly a challenging fictional subject — it is that of hundreds of North American novels and films — and is in fact one of the weaker features of a novel that might well have been a stronger performance had it been more thoroughly naturalistic in technique and eschewed the moral overlay.

Had it been so, the major source of the strength of *Duddy Kravitz* would have been more readily identifiable: the raw drive of the title character, who is Richler's most forceful and memorable creation at least partially because he is an incarnation of the

[14]For a detailed discussion of *Duddy Kravitz* from a moral perspective see D. J. Dooley's *Moral Vision in the Canadian Novel* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1979), pp. 93-107. Dooley's critical criteria are as follows: "If [a novelist] wins our respect, it must be because his characters have the stuff of life about them and because he has created a convincing social and moral context for them" (p. ix).

deconstructive, negating energy of Richler's imagination. Duddy may be placed in a moral context but the frame is ill-adapted to the picture. Duddy is a grating amoral force who is all undirected drive and aggression. His needs are deep and compulsive but because he does not know what they are he does not know how to satisfy them. For most of the novel the object of his desire is possession of the secret lake and its environs — in one scene his gaze remains fixed on them even while he is making love with Yvette. At moments, however, Duddy seems obscurely to sense that the source of his deepest needs lies elsewhere and is connected with his father and mother. But his father is emotionally empty, a defensive failure, a pimp and a dope, with nothing to give; and his mother is long dead. Duddy's deepest needs will never be satisfied no matter how hard he runs (though they do become more and more covered by the garish scab of material success). It is this demoralizing psychological datum, much more than his imputed moral failure, that stunts and ultimately withers Duddy's humanity even as it fuels his aggressive, destructive personality, and which makes him (when he reappears in *St. Urbain's Horseman)* speak deeper than he knows when he exclaims "How in the hell could anyone love Duddy Kravitz?"

One may close with a prediction. In the years before him Mordecai Richler the novelist will continue to offer superior fictional entertainments informed by moral concern and leavened with satiric bite, but unless his gamy fixations are transformed and the rough beast at the nadir of his vision can only again shoulder its way into the pages of his fiction, he will not be able to offer more.