

## IN VINDICATION OF DUDDY KRAVITZ

par Daniel S. LENOSKI  
Assistant Professor  
English Dept.  
St. Paul's College  
University of Manitoba

The vitality of any novel depends, not on plot, but on the ability of the writer to create character. This is one of the reasons that the most startling feature of the novels of Mordecai Richler is their incredible life. Like Fanny Burney, the eighteenth century novelist, Richler is a "character monger". In his work we encounter a plethora of personalities, fascinating and inspiring in their movements on the page.

This is not to say, however, that the life of Richler's people consists in the depth of their portrayal. It very often does not. For the most part his characters are flat. Their animation is accomplished not by penetrating psychological analysis but by detail and flawlessly written dialogue. For Richler is also a moralist and a satirist and accordingly, though we are often attracted to his creations, he also makes certain that we are distanced from them somewhat, so that we will be able to adopt a critical position. For the same reason Swift never described the thought processes of Gulliver. Thus, in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* we rarely penetrate beyond Duddy's brash grin.

At the same time, so alive are Richler's creations in their detail, dialogue and energy that moral judgements are sometimes not easy to make. If Richler is a moralist, he is also a humanist. He refuses to oversimplify the immoral act and indulge in mere preaching. His characters are flat but they are not mere allegorical signboards. Even Dingleman has a human past.

Perhaps the most difficult character to judge precisely is also the most alive : Duddy Kravitz. By the end of his apprenticeship, Duddy has committed every one of the seven deadly sins. He has ruined the lives of Virgil and Yvette, disappointed his Zeyda, broken the law and replaced Dingleman as the symbol of iniquity in the novel. He has obviously opted to become the behemoth his uncle Benjy disliked so much and yet, like Benjy, the reader finds it difficult to forget the *mensh* in Duddy (1). The dominant reaction at the end of the novel is one of regret, not merely moral condemnation.

The most obvious reason for this moral vagueness on our part, is, of course, the fact that Duddy is one of the most energetic and distinctive characters in all of Canadian literature. As Yvette and Benjy point out, he is always "running or jumping

or scratching" (p.100, p.286). When Duddy is felled by an obstacle, his setback is only temporary. Whether outmaneuvered for the moment by Irwin or Dingleman or by Virgil's accident, his will ultimately triumphs, even if his moral being sometimes suffers. For example, having been swindled out of a summer's salary at Rubin's Hotel, he nevertheless emerges triumphant, in possession of the affection of the guests, twice as much money and the blissful memory of a night in the grass with a pretty girl. He even manages two days off work. It is difficult not to admire Duddy's force and courage in the face of the formidable opposition in the novel. After all, Duddy has none of the advantages of his opponents. He operates from a position of material and spiritual poverty and his quick success in a corrupt world devoted to his assimilation is an extraordinary achievement.

Given the opposition and deprivation he experiences, can we really blame Duddy for wanting money, status and power? Dreams are important on a street flavoured by "risky" staircases, vacant lots and decaying fruit (p.11). Thus, old men, suffocating in their ghetto corners, dream about green fields and sky (p.369). However, separated from the Zeyda by his father's intervention, Duddy's dreams are driven by a tough realism rather than by the romance and morality of the old culture. As a result, he has few illusions. Very early in his life Duddy realizes that the idealistic, the weak and the moral are destroyed. Cuckoo, Lennie, Mac, Friar, Herh, Yvette and Virgil confirm this knowledge. Cohen reminds him of it. After all, Simcha's tomatoes, images of failure, are stunted.

If all of these characters act as foils by which we judge Duddy, he rarely suffers in the comparison. Indeed, immediately after Duddy leads his gang along St. Urban Street singing "Oh Nellie put your belly close to mine./Wiggle your bum" (p.14), Mac is presented as kicking his feet together from the cold, worrying about his wife's cough and about catching germs on the bus (pp: 14-17). Richler's deliberate juxtaposition of the two scenes is hardly complimentary to Mac. He appears completely ineffectual and it is not surprising that the Kravitz will triumph. Mac and Idealism are destroyed by Duddy's killing phone call. Yet even here it is difficult to judge Duddy harshly, for Mac arrives home drunk after a night of impossible dreams. Furthermore, if we agree that the morality of any act is determined by motive not by deed, Duddy is guilty only of malice, not of murder. And even the malice is understandable when Mac's slander of his father is considered. In any case, Duddy emerges from the encounter strong and confident. Mac's whimpers gradually disappear into the background.

Similarly, any judgement of Duddy's indifference to Yvette's love must be tempered by the knowledge that his father and his uncle neglect him in favour of the anemic Lennie. Indeed, the parallelism is underlined by Richler early in the novel when Duddy ignores love with the words "Sure. Sure thing" (p.109) and then, in the

very next chapter, reacts to Max's brush-off by using the same words before breaking into tears (pp. 119-120). Our sympathy for Yvette in her unrequited love is undeniable ; but so is our compassion for Duddy, while he worries about whether his mother loved him but is afraid to ask lest the answer confirm Max and Benjy's opinion of him (p.146).

Not even Virgil, the rather irritating and incredible symbol of innocence in the novel, can be said to emerge superior to Duddy when the two are compared ; for Virgil's newspaper proves him to be a fool, and he does, after all, bear some responsibility for the accident. Duddy is never a fool, though he befriends fools like Virgil, Cuckoo and Hersh. Nor is he fooled by the ideological hobby-horses of Friar, Virgil, Ida and Benjy.

At times Duddy even adopts a sensitivity not unlike that of Virgil. Hurt by Lennie's rebuffs, the younger brother reacts with an assertion of self-sacrifice . He will help Lennie pay his tuition. Then, embarrassed by the display of emotion, he flees (pp. 17-18). And at the end of the novel he is still giving to his family. As Benjy recognizes in their last meeting(p.284), he is both its head and its adhesive. It is Duddy, not Max nor Benjy who retrieves Lennie and Ida. Sometimes Duddy's generosity even extends beyond his family. For example, in Part III, Hersh – "let's not take advantage like" (p.6) – takes advantage of Duddy by virtually living off him.

Duddy is also capable of feeling guilt. While his first reaction to Virgil's accident is selfish, his business and his health are all but destroyed by his subsequent emotional display. Only Cohen's advice resurrects the will to live, and that advice is sound in a practical sense. What other alternative has a young and poor Jew whose moral being has never been properly cultivated ?

Another factor to be considered when judging Duddy is his rather deficient moral education. He is not only the forgotten child of a forgotten child, but also the son of a pimp and, like his father , treats the women in his life as commodities. Both the inadequacy of Max as a father and Lennie as a brother are revealed by the necessity Duddy feels to invent a figure such as Bradley to replace them. Bradley also functions as a symbol of hope and success. However, a more immediate symbol of those rather rare commodities on St. Urbain Street is provided by Max's stories of the "boy wonder". Desperate for paternal affection, Duddy adopts the moral education implied by the mythic life of Jerry Dingleman.

Simcha, on the other hand, does attempt a more substantial moral education of Duddy and, because he is the one person whose love Duddy recognizes, his words are heavy with moral authority. Thus, when the Zeyda tells Duddy that "A man without land is nobody" (p.48), Duddy remembers and resolves to acquire land. Unfor-

tunately, however, Simcha and Duddy communicate through the veils of time, age and culture. Simcha is Duddy's grandfather, but also the product of a disappearing mode of being and Duddy does not understand that the word "land" carries with it the traditional Jewish connotations of promise, home, security and love. He thinks his Zeyda means property. He has not been taught otherwise. Indeed, his experience at Rubin's resort confirms his interpretation of his grandfather's words. Duddy never forgets this introduction to the world of business. Nor does he fail to learn from his experience with Hugh Thomas Calder.

Nevertheless, even at the end of the novel Duddy is no mere materialist. Forced by the neglect of his family and environment into independence and aggression, he values property not merely as an end, but because it enables him to discover a sense of freedom, dignity and power. This is why Duddy refuses Cohen's loan and Benjy's offer of a partnership. Both would involve the submission of his will to others and a loss of independence and dignity. Duddy has developed a morality and *he*, not property, is his alpha and omega. Still, we admire his refusal to allow either Cohen or Benjy to help. Duddy Kravitz, the individualist *par excellence*, succeeds on his own terms.

Thus even if we condemn Duddy's actions at the end of the novel, it is difficult to dislike Duddy himself. Realizing that there are always extenuating circumstances attached to any act on which a moral judgement may be made, Richler has carefully created the right human setting for Duddy's sins and, as a result, our assessment of him inevitably involves the consciousness of his social, domestic and cultural background and the recognition that he is very often subject to the same misery he produces in others. Furthermore, in all his energy and basic humanity Duddy is capable of evoking love and also admiration, even at the end of the novel, because, despite all his difficulties, strength of will and courage enable him to succeed in the quest for personhood. The reader never forgets the last two words in the novel and he continues at the end as he had begun : on a first name basis with "Duddy".

#### NOTE

1. *Mordecai Richler, The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz, Toronto : McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1974, p.11. All subsequent references are to this volume.*