

Mordecai Richler as Satirist

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MORDECAI Richler's development as a novelist now stretches over a span of some twenty years. This development has carried his writing away from a rather melodramatic realism towards satirical fantasy and farce. *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* is a pivotal point in this development. As George Woodcock rightly points out, realist and satiric traditions clash with some "jarring shifts of focus"¹ in this work, but it is the satiric tone that dominates. *Duddy Kravitz* has strong intimations of the comic techniques and break-neck pace that are among the main virtues of *Cocksure* and *St. Urbain's Horseman*. The question to be answered about these later works is whether they are merely entertainments, which by pandering to a public hungry for comic pornography and undemanding farce have compromised Richler's reputation as a serious novelist. To do these works justice, it is of course essential to approach them as satires. This method may seem self-evident, but it has not always been applied by critics. Naim Kattan, who is in general very fair to Richler, lists the following "limitations" of *Duddy Kravitz*:

[Richler] is led to destroy his characters through caricature. Facing a society which he wishes to conquer, he has no time to look at it, to understand it, to perceive its complete ambiguity. His characters are linear . . . fabricated by a novelist whose wish to do battle is stronger than his desire to comprehend.²

This is an accurate description of Richler's manner, but is this manner necessarily limiting, especially in satire? Alvin Kernan claims that "unwillingness to ponder any situation or investigate it thoroughly" is part of the "well-

known tendency of satire to pass rapidly from one subject to another without lingering for many lines on any single fool or particular piece of foolishness."³ It is also a classical technique of the satirist to mount an ethical attack by mocking his victims with tendentious distortion and simplification. It is not the critic's task to reproach the satirist for having created caricatures, but rather to discover whether these caricatures are distinguished by wit and satirical sting.

In this essay I shall discuss Richler's four most successful novels, *Son of a Smaller Hero*, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *Cocksure*, and *St. Urbain's Horseman*,⁴ in an attempt to prove that Richler is a first-rate satirist and humorist, blessed with a highly articulate sense of what is ridiculous in human behaviour and the imagination to invent fast-moving plots inspired by a zany fantasy. As for characterisation, 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. Finally, Richler's satiric themes are contemporary, relevant, and probing, and in his latest novel, *St. Urbain's Horseman*, he has succeeded in combining satire, fantasy and farce with moments of near-tragic intensity.

Smaller Hero is not primarily a satire; it is more a moral drama of Noah Adler's quest for truth and the maturity to temper this truth with compassion. There are, however, some very successful comic and satiric scenes in the novel. They are found predominantly outside the central relationships between Noah and Miriam, and Noah and his *zeyda*, in Richler's representation of ghetto life in Montreal. One thinks of the ghoulish crowd glugging coke while they goggle at the excavation for Wolf Adler's body. The varying tone and pace in the scene is masterly. The day is full of bitter gall for Melech Adler, for Itzik it is an occasion for self-righteous masquerade of orthodox ritual, for the crowds it is a holiday in macabre sensationalism,

and for a salesman a heaven-sent opportunity to sell life-insurance. Richler presents the scene tautly and with a minimum of intrusive comment. Some moments are frankly funny, as in the shop-sign "Mexican money is accepted in Mexico. Here, cash will do fine." Other moments feature a wit that is harsh and abrasive; for example, the hypocritical rent-collector from Outremont is described as a "man who did not take his employer's name in vain and who had honoured his father and mother ever since they had died" (p. 137). The whole scene culminates with a delicious irony of fate that mistakenly makes Wolf a folk hero and earns an opportunistic poet considerably more money for his ode to Adler than he had reaped for his Ode to Sacco and Vanzetti years before. Richler swiftly and pitilessly pillories many of his minor characters: Rabbi Fishman who is more interested in getting into the newspapers than giving religious solace; Marsha who makes out with a McGill quarterback while telling Noah she doesn't believe in premarital sex; Itzik who is "so busy counting the bars of soap in the johns . . . that he wouldn't know a million-dollar deal if he was hit over the head with it"; insincere mourners who "ladled out their slop of regrets in which platitudes floated like indigestible dumplings"; and finally Wolf himself, whose secret diary is revealed to be nothing more than a collection of nonsensically precise banalities. Richler reveals the two prime preoccupations of his wit in *Smaller Hero*: jewishness and sex. It is hilarious farce when Noah steals the sign reading "This beach is restricted to Gentiles" (p. 54), but for condensed satire this episode must yield to Theo Hall's academic party where the glib witticisms and sexual flirtations barely gloss over the hollowness of the merry-makers and in a fittingly grotesque climax to the occasion Mrs. Hall puts the stop-watch on her daughter-in-law's latest adultery.

In *Smaller Hero* it is evident that Richler feels much sympathy for the noble aspirations of his protagonist-hero,

Noah, and this is why the satiric mood is reserved primarily for the background. In *Duddy Kravitz*, however, the ambitions of Duddy are materialistic and his methods more than dubious. But Richler chooses not to mock Duddy; in fact he elicits a great deal of sympathy from the reader for the fierce, unapologetic hustling of his anti-hero, and turns his derision instead on the mediocrities and oddities whom Duddy leaves churning in his wake: Milty with his fears about his beezers and his tulips, Jewish middle-class businessmen and their wives, the scheming Irwin, whom Duddy denounces to the FBI as a communist and a pervert, and many others. In his apologia for Duddy, Richler appeals to the pathos of poverty (p. 298) and family ties (p. 312) and contrasts Duddy favourably with condescending, moralizing intellectuals (p. 242), North American businessmen like Cohen and the hideous Boy Wonder in particular. Not that Richler lets Duddy off scot-free. Uncle Benjy's moving letter to Duddy, begging him to be a *mensch* not a *behemoth*, states the novel's ethical theme; it is this theme that raises the novel above the level of clever farce and gives the concluding lines their full ironic impact. Duddy marvels at his new economic and social status and forgets, at least temporarily, that this success has cost him Virgil's friendship, Yvette's love, and his grandfather's moral approval. Duddy's ethical foils are Mr. MacPherson whose liberal idealism is derided by society at large and Yvette, whose touching need to give love is so horribly misunderstood by Duddy that he offers her money as a bribe to keep quiet about the land around the lake. Mr. MacPherson tried to be a *mensch* and so did Yvette, and that Richler chose to write tragically of their different failures lends poignancy and an ethical counterpoint to the social satire.

In his characterisation of Yvette, however, Richler is not convincing. Yvette begins as a simple French Canadian girl from the sticks who is kind-hearted but limited; she develops almost overnight into a shrewd businesswoman

and then into a lily-pure conscience constantly chiding the hapless Duddy. When Duddy retaliates by calling her a combination of Florence Nightingale and the United States cavalry (p. 302), we are more impressed by his wit than her credibility. But if Yvette is irritating in her righteous goodness, Virgil is insufferable in his cocker-spaniel trustfulness. In fact we are relieved — although startled — when the tension of his melodrama abruptly dissipates in a black-humour parody of his magazine for, by, and of epileptics. Energetically manipulating this jarring confusion of moods and characters is Duddy himself, who must be one of the most zesty and compelling villain-heroes in North American literature.

The great variety of moods in this novel suggests that Richler's *forte* as a writer is satiric farce with a tragic undertone. The satiric point of view prevents him from lapsing into bathos, and a potentially tragic perspective obviates the emergence of merely trivial farce. In this respect, *Duddy Kravitz* clearly anticipates *St. Urbain's Horseman*.

Richler's later works feature many techniques that are typical of the satirical genre. As John Carroll points out about *The Incomparable Atuk*, the first of Richler's unabashed satires: "Richler sets up his game with a classic manoeuvre of the satirist: put a savage in civilization, and then let the audience decide who is savage, who is civilized."⁵ This is the same technique as Huxley used in *Brave New World*. Richler varies it in *Cocksure* with humour of inversion. The civilized hero, whose only sin is to be old-fashioned, and therefore civilized, is isolated in a mod world of swinging savages. But this world of savages is painfully recognizable as our contemporary society. In order to identify with the decent underdog we are obliged to admit the insanity of the society we live in. Both Mortimer in *Cocksure* and Jake Hersh in *St. Urbain's Horseman* are an integral part of Richler's satiric vision of contemporary society where "decency is

forever in a precarious position near the edge of extinction, and the world is about to pass into eternal darkness. Consequently every effort is made to emphasize the destroying ugliness and power of vice."⁶

As a satirist and black humorist, Richler, like his contemporaries Joseph Heller, John Barth, and Kurt Vonnegut Jr., owes a great deal to Nathanael West. Richler and West both depict the world as a madhouse and the people in it as sick, perhaps irredeemably so. Protagonists like Mortimer Griffin and Jake Hersh, and Miss Lonelyhearts and Tod Hunter before them, are partially victims of the sickness around them, but mainly passive agents of their authors' satiric hostility to the sordid, futile world they live in. West is more bitter and pessimistic than Richler. Mortimer and Jake Hersh try to withdraw and seek refuge in family stability and passive liberal concern. But West had already rejected this kind of solution when he had Miss Lonelyhearts scorn a normal, suburban marriage with Betty as an ignoble escapism.

In his representation of an insane world, West is more economical, more sardonic, and more grotesque than Richler. Many of his characters are repulsive and vicious. One thinks of the cruel cynicism of Shrike, the twisted cripple Doyle and his gargantuan, lecherous wife, the writhing hands of Homer and that malicious braggart, Abe the dwarf. Richler's characters are on the whole more frivolous. Dingleman and the Starmaker are repulsive enough, it is true, but mainly in the sense of comic-book caricatures. Characters like Polly and Shalinsky in *Cocksure*, and Mr. Friar and Max Kravitz in *Duddy Kravitz* have more to do with humorous fantasy and farce than they do with the grotesque.

Most of Richler's satire is light-hearted and farcical in tone, is outrageously explicit on race, religion, and sex, and draws on an apparently inexhaustible supply of contemporary and topical bêtises. Richler's techniques range from soft-core pornography and sick humour to Freudian

farce, a zany comic fantasy that is most successful in his imaginary film scripts, an impish pleasure in turning established conventions upside down to reveal the absurdity of our prejudices, and the gift of a mimic in parodying the most varied clichés and jargons. West, by way of contrast, prefers to concentrate his satiric fire on a single major target; in *Miss Lonelyhearts* on the Mephistophelian abyss separating the Christian ideal from everyday human bestiality and cynicism, in the *Day of the Locust* on the soullessness of the warped star-worship instigated by Hollywood. When Richler satirizes Hollywood in *Cocksure* he is unable to resist the temptation to wander off into a spoof on Jewish-Negro-Wasp relationships in swinging London. What he does have to say about Hollywood, however, is more than worthy of comparison with West's picture of Hollywood in *Day of the Locust*. *Cocksure* is a vitriolic fantasy in which the great American dream of effortless beauty, luxury, and instant satisfaction is transformed through Polly into a surrealist farce of frustration and through the Starmaker into a nightmare of obscene artificiality. Of course, *Cocksure* is not intended to create the mood of bitterness and brooding that overwhelms the reader in *Day of the Locust*. It is more a zany burlesque. For example, the idea of a plastic goy-boy superstar with three whole expressions who gets deflated and hung in the closet between films is hilarious and inventive rather than biting. Mortimer's imminent demise at the end of *Cocksure* is a delightful parody of a Scotland Yard murder mystery, whereas the riot and the burning of Los Angeles at the end of *Day of the Locust* are of apocalyptic horror. When Richler does go beyond whimsy and farce, it is almost invariably Nazi war crimes that inspire him to do so. In *Cocksure* he pillories Lord Woodcock, who collects sweet little stories about good deeds done by Nazi murderers in order to prove that there is some good in every man, and in the *Horseman* he alludes sarcastically to Lord Moyne who refused to barter some trucks for the lives of a mil-

lion Jews. His sarcasm culminates in the angry aphorism, "If God weren't dead, it would be necessary to hang him" (p. 271). This novel also launches some forceful attacks on Israeli smugness, arrogance, and cruelty.

As a black humorist Richler has considerably enriched the satiric tradition of Ambrose Bierce and Nathanael West. Take the story of Mrs. Fishman in *Cocksure*. Mrs. Fishman was the one-millionth Jew to be burnt in the furnace-chambers of Treblinka, Richler tells us, and the halls were festooned with "gaily coloured Chinese lanterns" for the occasion. The survivors of this "sentimental barbecue" commemorate it as one of "the most ring-a-ding nights in the history of the Third Reich" (p. 31). Any laughter that one feels here at the witty incongruity of the word-choice is stifled by the blackness of the humour. Occasionally Richler seems to indulge in macabre fantasies out of perverse wilfulness. At one stage in *Cocksure* the Starmaker's transplant doctors dance up to his mutilated spare-parts men gaily chanting "We want a kidney." After enjoying the cowering slobber of their victims, they chant "We were only kidding" (pp. 73-74). Such sick jokes remain funny only because they are set in the world of non-sense fantasy where Richler is so very much at home.

Richler's imaginative world might be fairly described as one where twisted Gothic gargoyles copulate obscenely with fiendishly grinning amoretti, where the horrifying is promiscuously linked with the sexually trivial. This creates a scrappy bits and pieces impression but in those anecdotes in which Richler does succeed in combining sex with wit, the result is inspired nonsense. Ziggy says of his girlfriend, "She's thoroughly middle-class, actually. What I mean is she goes with dogs, but stops at great danes" (p. 90). Woodcock calls these "bawdy jokes" "adolescent" and suggests that "part of the humour they evoke is based on the incongruity of such primitive jests appearing in a novel that in other respects is very sophisticated." What sophisticated satire there is in *Cocksure* is directed largely

against trendiness; the most mockery is aimed at the people who are with it in the latest fashion in the sexual revolution, progressive education, racial and ethnic exploitation of the guilty white liberal conscience, and American big business methods in the film and publishing world.

Richler often seems content to work with a stereotyped image of the people he is writing about. Many of his Jews, like Cohen, Dingleman, Shalinsky, Hy Rosen, and Harry for example, are short, swarthy, goy-hating and money-grubbing. His Wasp figures, such as Hugh Thomas Calder, Mortimer Griffin, Ormsby-Fletcher, and Derek Burton, are mostly elegant, restrained, tall, tasteful, liberal establishment squares. In the same vein, Germans are jackbooted assassins in *Cocksure* working as henchmen for American big-business know-how which has finally succeeded in replacing truculent human labour with plastic perfection. This is not exactly original image-making. But as Evelyn Waugh has shown in his depiction of the English upper classes in the twenties and thirties, a satirist can work very successfully with stereotypes.

In any case, stereotypes or not, Richler reduces inter-racial sex and modern educational theories to a hilarious farce in *Cocksure* that is every bit as scintillating as Waugh at his best. Mortimer, for example, worries himself sick in case his "precious erection" for Rachel is "not sexually motivated, but politically inspired" (p. 153), only to have her demand money for intercourse and hear her say "this pussy doesn't cream for Jew boys" (p. 155). Rachel has evidently not heard Tom Lehrer's National Brotherhood Week. Through paradoxical humour of inversion Richler manages to deride both hard-core pornography and conventional educational mores in one and the same incident: Miss Ryerson is asked to resign from her teaching position not for having done blow-jobs on four of her boys in second form, but because she has chosen the four highest ranking boys for the reward, and has thereby "re-intro-

duced . . . soul-destroying, capitalist-style competition" (p. 170). Myriads of such zany anecdotes show how well *Cocksure* fits Alvin Kernan's definition of the satiric scene as a canvas in which "vulgarity, vanity, lust and animality combine to create a writhing mass of flesh and human litter."⁸ It is in itself a satiric jest, that Richler himself doubtless treasures, that the prudish Australian censors were unable to tell satiric art from pornographic trash and balked at releasing *Cocksure* in Australia.

Richler prefaces *St. Urbain's Horseman* with a quotation from Auden which suggests that he does not wish to be read as a mere entertainer, a fanciful farceur. Auden's lines evoke a mood of cosmic despair illumined only by a rare "affirming flame." What is there in the *Horseman* that would justify us regarding it as such a flame? Certainly the despair that we find there is serious enough; the world around Jake Hersh is sordid and vile. Jake himself despairs and lapses into neuroticism and paranoia as he struggles to defend the few liberal ideals he has salvaged from his war with an insane world. Confusedly he holds to his notions of artistic integrity and family loyalty, and worries ineffectually about social injustice and the starving millions. His 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. And so Jake clings to his comic-book fantasy of the horseman as righter of all wrongs and at the very end of a novel, which had begun farcically, we understand his need for this romantic escapism and dismayed by the injustice that has been done him, we are overwhelmed by tragic pity.

In *Cocksure* Richler made no attempt to create his central character, Mortimer, from the inside, but instead concentrated, as he also did in *Atuk*, on external events in the spoof. In the *Horseman*, however, Richler endeavours to give Jake Hersh an inner life of fantasy and ethical self-

questioning. The narrative form reflects this new ambition of the author by alternating between flashes of racy dialogue and long, rambling passages of interior monologue. The brief dialogue keeps a tenuous hold on reality and the interior monologue allows the author to roam over an extraordinary range of contentious subjects, most of them ingeniously distorted by Jake's overheated imagination for the purpose of satiric farce. Jake's compulsive fantasies reveal him to be a middle-aged neurotic who is perennially anxious about the security of his family's happiness and who is depressed by "self-hatred and debilitating doubts" (p. 228) about his ability to make it to the top as a film director. As Jake woefully and rather unjustifiably says of himself "Not all the candidates pass" (p. 201). He has adopted the pose of a sad clown who has exchanged the youthful Noah Adler's fiery charger and knight's armour for an ass with cap and bells. But Richler very evidently approves of his semi-autobiographical protagonist because he accords sympathetic treatment to only two characters in his novel, Jake and his wife Nancy. 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. The central satirical targets are rich middle-aged Jews who have sullied their youthful idealism and their vows to remember the Spanish civil war and Auschwitz, and who are now guiltily intent on guarding the ignoble privileges of their affluence by making hypocritical claims to be liberal. Richler calls them "the left-wingers, those staunch heroes of the Hampstead barricades" whose sham realism he lambastes with blasphemous parody when they pray for "Father Hoffman's intercession with the Almighty to save them from surtax on earth and the avarice everlasting of used wives" (p. 221). Jake has too much intellectual integrity to forget or to be hypocritical. But this means that his conscience troubles

him all the more because he is only too aware of the inhuman gap between his own affluence and the poverty of millions. As Richler puts it, when his idyll is threatened by his law-suit, "From the beginning he had expected the outer brutalized world to intrude on their little one, inflated with love but ultimately self-serving and cocooned by money" (p. 89). Indeed it is almost as though he is unconsciously punishing himself for being happy and well-off and that is why he passively allows Harry to get him into the whole mess. But Jake is not satirized. It is true that he speaks of himself with ironic deprecation, but this inferiority complex combined with his love for his wife and the touching, humorous scenes he has with his children only increases our sympathy with him. Some critics evidently don't see Jake this way: "Neither Jake nor his unscrupulous pursuer, the paranoid Harry Stein, and least of all the tearaway Horseman, Joey, stands up as an achieved character deserving respect or concern."⁹ There is no justification for disparaging Jake's characterisation in this way. The reader who does not feel tragic pity for Jake at the end of the novel has simply held himself aloof from an experience that is both moving and gives the novel its cohesion and ethical impetus.

As for Harry, he is an altogether revolting character and was presumably not meant to win our "respect and concern," but rather our fascination and ultimately our loathing. It is more than enough for Harry to be what he is, a voyeuristic, paranoid, sordid, super-intelligent, self-deluded socialist who really suffers from nothing more than galloping envy, sexually and financially. Harry has a curiously contradictory role in the novel. He is presented as a nasty blackmailer and pervert, but on the other hand one feels that his attacks on the capitalist social order have a lot of truth to them. When he calls the chiroprapist "a servile little turd" he is correct, but his manner is distasteful. A serious socialist theme is presented through Harry's well-informed and unrelenting statistics. The British class-

system is mocked by a fugue-like contrast between Winston Churchill's spine-tingling rhetoric about selflessness and unity during the war, while the real truth of greed, snobism and exploitation by the rich is revealed by Harry (pp. 22-24). This truth is undoubtedly good for us, the readers, but for Harry himself it is not good; he is consumed by rancour and resentment at what he has discovered. His intelligence has ruined him for the enjoyment of life.

It is pointless to ask whether Joey is an "achieved character," for he is not meant to be realistically convincing. He is shrouded in mystery and rumour because his function is almost a supernatural one, namely to express the absolute dividing line between corruption and purity, cowardice and courage. That is to say that cousin Joey is to a large extent what you are yourself. People who are themselves corrupt are satisfied that Joey is nothing but a liar, a blackmailer, a cruel terrorist, smuggler, shit-disturber, card-sharp, and maybe even murderer. But to Jake, who stands for "decency, tolerance, honor" (p. 308), cousin Joey is the horseman, "his moral editor" (p. 311), a projection of the exacting standards of his own conscience, a vision of a fighter for justice who answers Jake's cry for a "revelation" (p. 302).

Romantic visions of Joey form only one part of Jake's interior monologue, which is also given over to travestied anxiety about his family's security and health, and an obsessive preoccupation with ribald sexual fantasies and reminiscences. The question is are these sexual fantasies anything more than entertainment for an avidly voyeuristic public? The answer is a decisive yes. Richler is very much the leader in the comic division of today's revolutionary army for free sexual expression and wide tolerance, and is astonishingly inventive in his parodies of pornography. His skits are marked by a brilliant staccato pace, a Rabelaisian explicitness of language, and an unflinching sense of what is both titillating and ridiculous. These sex-

ual skits are only one part of the *Horseman's* extraordinary concoction of anecdotes, tall stories, montages, and fantasies. Such a potpourri cheerfully flouts the conventional novel's laws of form and leaves an impression of exuberant and chaotic fullness. These are features that have been common to the satirical novel since the days of Petronius' *Satyricon*. As Northrop Frye remarks: "A deliberate rambling digressiveness . . . is endemic in the narrative technique of satire. . . . The word satire is said to come from *satura*, or hash, and a kind of parody of form seems to run all through its tradition."¹⁰ In range of topic, technique and mood, *St. Urbain's Horseman* presents a bewilderingly rich picture of contemporary Western society. One thinks of the parodying mimicry of sentimental movies, an art professor's woolly jargon, or Jake's father's bigoted polemic against interracial marriages, one thinks of such malicious epigrams as the definition of Canada as "thousands of miles of wheat, indifference, and self-apology," one thinks of the light-hearted farce on Herky's anti-bedwetting device and Harrod's sumptuous ablutionary block, one thinks of the zany absurdity of the Filmmaker's First Wives Club or the rabbi's lecture on seafood, and finally one thinks of the more serious satire on such issues as race, affluence, and the liberal stance. One could go on indefinitely. *St. Urbain's Horseman* is Richler's best work to date; it is as ethically searching as *Son of a Smaller Hero*, has a main character as compelling as Duddy Kravitz, and is as entertaining as *Cocksure*. With this novel Richler has established his satiric stature as comparable to that of both Nathanael West and Evelyn Waugh.

NOTES

¹George Woodcock, *Mordecai Richler, Canadian Writers*, No. 6 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970), p. 43.

²Naim Kattan, "Mordecai Richler," *Canadian Literature*, No. 21 (Summer 1964), p. 50.

³Alvin Kernan, "A Theory of Satire," *Modern Satire*, ed. Alvin Kernan (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), p. 179.

- ⁴*Son of a Smaller Hero* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965); *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964); *Cocksure* (New York: Bantam, 1969); *St. Urbain's Horseman* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971). Subsequent page references are to the above editions.
- ⁵John Carroll, "On Richler and Ludwig," *Tamarack Review*, No. 29 (Autumn 1963), p. 98.
- ⁶Alvin Kernan, "A Theory of Satire," p. 169.
- ⁷George Woodcock, *Mordecai Richler*, p. 49.
- ⁸Alvin Kernan, p. 169.
- ⁹*TLS*, 3 Sept. 1971, p. 1045.
- ¹⁰Northrop Frye, "The Mythos of Winter," *Modern Satire*, ed. Alvin Kernan, p. 161.