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## **“The truth will out” – Mordecai Richler’s *Barney’s Version***

### **Abstract**

*Any autobiography, whether fictional or not, is fuelled by memory. It is the engine behind the writing, the sine qua non of any writing with a truth claim. But if even the sharpest memory is victim to the vanishings of time, to what extent can an autobiographer be truthful, reliable? Is it at all possible? After an examination of the link between memory and literature, as well as of the concept of reliability in fiction, the paper looks at how Mordecai Richler deals with these questions in his final novel, Barney’s Version. In the novel Richler presents a narrator who longs to put the “true story” of his life to paper, while suffering from Alzheimer’s and the limits to exactitude inherent to the disease. The result of this is a confusion of personal history, reliability, autobiography and the questioning of – and ultimately an affirmation of – whether the truth can be known.*

### **Résumé**

*Chaque autobiographie, qu’elle soit fictive ou non, a un besoin fort de mémoire - parce que la mémoire dirige l’acte d’écrire. C’est la condition sine qua non de tout texte élevant des prétentions à la vérité. Mais si le temps corrompt et détériore même la mémoire la plus vive, dans quelle mesure peut-on parler d’une autobiographie vraie? L’entreprise est-elle nécessairement futile? Après avoir examiné le rapport entre la mémoire et la littérature, et en scrutant tout particulièrement le rôle de l’exactitude narrative, article examine comment Mordecai Richler traite cette question dans son dernier roman. Avec Barney’s Version, Richler présente un narrateur qui voudrait écrire “l’histoire vraie” de sa vie, même s’il souffre de la maladie d’Alzheimer et malgré les limites de l’exactitude inhérents à la maladie. Cette combinaison soulève des questions sur l’histoire personnelle ainsi que sur l’exactitude d’une autobiographie, et met en doute – avant de nier ce doute – le fait qu’on puisse découvrir la vérité.*

Sherlock Holmes, when told by Dr. Watson that the “earth travel[s] round the sun” replies, “Now that I [...] know, I shall do my best to forget it” (Doyle, 29f). He plans to forget this in order to free up space for more important things, “not to have useless facts elbowing out the useful ones” (ibid., 31). The message is this: if we weren’t selective, we would be lost in a sea of information. The message is also that all memory, like all story telling depends on forgetting, leaving things out, streamlining. Perhaps a mind like Holmes’ can make this happen actively; more often it happens passively through the natural vanishings of time. In Mordecai Richler’s *Barney’s Version* these vanishings are accelerated as Barney Panofsky suffers through Alzheimer’s while attempting to write his memoirs, the “true story” of his life (Richler, 1). The result of this writing through limits

inherent to his disease is a confusion of personal history, reliability, autobiography and the questioning – and ultimate affirmation – of whether the truth can be known. This limiting confusion, especially of memory, shows the difficulty of rendering truth in fiction while not refuting its existence.

Though it might be tempting to believe that postmodernist writing first coupled writing and memory, first thematized truth and its revelation in print, the link is nothing new. Stories, histories, have to happen and be recalled before they can be neatly ordered into a narrative; events have to be remembered before they can be entered into the diary. When Aristotle famously posted his job descriptions for the “poet and the historian,” he indirectly pointed out the importance of memory: “The true difference [between the poet and the historian] is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen” (Aristotle, *Poetics*, IX). This necessarily means that memory plays a role in the handing down of any history. Even allowing for the epistemological unlikelihood that an individual *can* know the whole truth about a past event, memory is the historian’s muse: if the chronicler tells the truth, it is on the basis of memory; if she lies, it is an active decision to ignore memory. The pattern is the same for any narrative that says, even if with the knowing wink of fiction, “this is what happened” – that is, even the creators of alternate worlds have to deal realistically with the limits of what an individual can remember (Cohn, 162).

It is no coincidence that Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, was also the mother of the Muses and therefore the mother of art. If the historian’s need to remember is obvious, this divine link reminds us that literature, too, feeds at Mnemosyne’s breast. As United States poet laureate Billy Collins believes, the resemblance is more than just familial, since the figures of speech and devices that help us recognize poetry and poetic language, originally “were simply mnemonic devices – tricks to facilitate the storage and retrieval of information” (Collins, 5). As the *Meridian Handbook of Classical Mythology* proclaims, that the metaphor of Mnemosyne as mother of the muses “would have been particularly apt” “[b]efore the invention of writing” (Tripp, 383). Within the oral tradition the various tricks and tropes used by the writer today did not so much ‘tease us out of thought’ as please us into remembering in the days before scribes, hard drives and other concrete storage devices.

The fraternity between memory and history is particularly relevant when it comes to autobiography, the form of narrative with the strongest truth claim. Autobiography is a mini-history, with the advantage that the author *knows* the subject more fully, is more privy to the internal thoughts, desires, motivations, etc., than even the bedfellow biographer. The exclusivity of this inside information means that, as many have argued, writing autobiography is a highly ethical act. It is an ethical act because when translating one’s life to paper, the writer claims to be telling the truth, writing a history rather than a story. The autobiographer is a translator who determines what lands on the printed page, and non-speakers of this private language (those thoughts, desires, etc.) can only hope the autobiographer is broadcasting the message accurately, truthfully.

When Vladimir Nabokov laid down his life and times in *Speak, Memory*, the title was not an invocation to the muse, but to the mother of the Muses. In fact, Nabokov had wanted *Speak, Mnemosyne*, but was dissuaded when reminded “that

little old ladies would not want to ask for a book whose title they could not pronounce”, or remember, one presumes (Nabokov, 11). In any case, the title chosen is far less confident than the American edition that had first been published as *Conclusive Evidence*. Unlike the definitive earlier title the new edition’s imperative *Speak* entails a split in the author; we are not all Sherlock Holmes’s who can choose what we want to remember. We can give memory commands, but we are ultimately its slave. Wayne Johnston reminds us of this in *Human Amusements* as a fictional would-be author informs his publisher that he is

contemplating an answer to Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*. My book, which will be a much slimmer volume than Proust’s and which I plan to start when I am eighty, will be called *Forgetfulness of Things that Happened Only Yesterday*. And thus will the ‘Novel of Senility’ be born. (Johnston, 196)

In many ways *Barney’s Version* by Mordecai Richler is that novel. As curmudgeonly, unreliable Barney Panofsky sits down to pen his memoirs, Richler rubs the reader’s nose in the relationship between memory and writing. How well can we know the self? Can truth out? How reliable is the link between knowing the self and letting others know about that self through fiction?

It may be that the unreliable narrator is the most present feature of 20th century fiction, that for years our stories were told to us by people whose tales or viewpoints we have “reasons to suspect” (Rimmon-Kenan, 100). Though there are many reasons why we might “suspect” the tale-teller – ranging from finding him morally questionable as in Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*, to realizing his limitations such as in Ford’s *The Good Soldier*, to suspecting him of lying such as in Grass’s *The Tin Drum* – the common denominator is a sense that the tale is not being told the “right” way, that there could be a more reliable, trustworthy version of the events. Just as an unreliable person is not consistent, not dependable, so is the unreliable narrator a shape-shifter. When Wayne Booth coined the term four decades ago in his *Rhetoric of Fiction* he linked it to a rejection of omniscience, arguing that “modern authors have experimented with unreliable narrators whose characteristics change in the course of the works they narrate” (Booth, *Rhetoric*, 156f). In other words, they might not be telling the truth, whether intentionally distorting or not.

Narrative reliability, realism and memory are intimately linked. If we often doubt the narrator, we have also “learned to regard the devious ways of narrative [itself] with a certain suspicion,” doubting “that a straightforward narrative can tell the truth about human life” (Fulford, 96). The logic is this: life is not that simple or linear and unreliability is therefore the ideal way to tell a story. A balance has to be struck between form and accuracy, order has to be formed from the chaos of experience and the memory thereof.

Nabokov’s title, *Speak, Memory*, is a reminder that Memory might not speak. And even when it does, in autobiography, or fictional autobiography, the more seamless a first-person narrative runs, the more likely we are to doubt its accuracy. Any first-person narrator, after all, implies a limited viewpoint, even towards herself. As Dorrit Cohn writes in *Transparent Minds*, the

first-person narrator (in contrast to the narrator of third persons who can tune it at will on the silent language of his characters) can reach his past thoughts only by simulation of a perfect memory, long quotation of his past thoughts can quickly appear as a kind of mnemonic overkill, as contrived [in fiction] as it would be in a real autobiography. (Cohn, 162)

Of course, given the alternative – that is, a messy narrative punctuated with “I thinks” and a more realistic series of “just a minute, it will come to me” – we readily accept these white lies of “mnemonic overkill” as one of the conditions for reading, namely the imaginative openness required for any work of art. We do not expect a perfect memory from any first-person narrator, and we allow for, even assume, the possibility that they may “go far beyond transcribing that which they have experienced themselves by letting the narrative arise anew from their imagination” (Stanzel, 215). But this inherent creativity that divorces fact from fiction does not make for an unreliable narrator; it makes a narrator. It is here that the otherwise transparent term “unreliable narrator” diverges from the common usage of the word. We may call a person “unreliable” when they are frugal with the truth, but calling a narrator unreliable for telling lies is like accusing the magician of tricking us. In other words, that is just the author doing his job.

What we *do* expect from the narrator is a certain consistency. In Wayne Booth’s definition:

I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), *unreliable* when he does not.<sup>1</sup> (Booth, 159)

Obviously these lines downplay the reader’s role in co-creating a text (will the norms and ethical content I derive from a text mirror yours? Not likely). Still, Booth offers a useful moniker for the dissonance the unreliable narrator introduces, especially against the smooth harmonic lines of past stories we have read, those “straightforward narratives” that Fulford says we have come to doubt.

In most cases, the suspicion that the narrator is not entirely reliable enters slowly. If we agree with Booth that we can derive norms or an implied author from a text (allowing for differences between individuals), then we must concede that it takes time for that author to take shape, for those norms to appear. They have to be established by the text itself before they can be broken. In Mordecai Richler’s spin on the technique, unreliability enters with the very title: *Barney’s Version*, as if it were just one of several testimonies, as though we should listen to all the “versions” before passing judgement. The title may imply that there are other versions, but that is a lie. There is *only* Barney’s version. No more witnesses are available. It is the singular form that provides the unreliable narrator with a guaranteed ear for his story.

Barney Panofsky is unreliable both as a narrator and as a person. With him narrative authority and credibility are thrown out the window. He makes his money in film and television – a medium and milieu Richler never tired of ridiculing (Ramraj, 6), even while producing material for it – by filling up Canadian content quotas through his company “Totally Unnecessary

Productions". He calls himself a "sinner," noting that he has made a fortune riding the quota law "that insisted on (and bankrolled to a yummy degree) so much Canadian-manufactured pollution on our airwaves" (Richler, 5). He scorns his own company's products, yet recognizes and proclaims his hypocrisy. When in what he calls "Captain Canada" mode, he appears before governmental ministers to defend the need for shlocky Canadian television: "We are this country's memory, its soul, its hypostasis," he says, "the defence against our being overwhelmed by the egregious cultural imperialists to the south of us" (ibid., 5). From the start Barney sends off warning signals that he is not entirely trustworthy, and that he is entirely aware that he is a lip server. This is the man who has taken up the pen, at a ripe old age, to write his autobiography.

Narrative authority and credibility may be thrown out the window here, but this is no defenestration of the author, nor is it a rose window to the relativity of truth. It ain't postmodern. As Barney sits down to write, there is no questioning of truth's existence. With three ex-wives haunting his conscience (one suicide, two divorces) and a suspected murderer of his best friend, Barney wants to write the true version of his life, including his wild days in 1950s Paris, his peccadilloes and greater sins, his visceral hatred of enemies, and his regrets, especially the adultery that led to the loss of his third wife – "Miriam, Miriam, my heart's desire" (ibid., 18). The truth will out should be the novel's motto; the record will be set straight – the only barrier to recapturing that truth is memory.

Within a few pages we learn that memory is a formidable barrier, for *Barney's Version* is the tale of a sharp mind succumbing to Alzheimer's disease. He relates conversations he had in the Bohemian atmosphere of post-war Paris with verve, but just as we are settling in to a Parisian feast of nostalgia, expecting Hemingway and Callaghan all over again, there is a hiccup in the narrative: "Hold the phone. I'm stuck. I'm trying to remember the name of the author of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*" (ibid., 10). Why, we wonder, should any raconteur care about such details? At other times Barney's narrative sputters while he strains to recall the proper name for a colander, the "spaghetti thingamabob", or the names of all of Snow White's Seven Dwarves. After these and other frequent interruptions Barney backtracks, claiming that the "name of the author [...] doesn't matter. It's of no importance" (ibid., 11).

But these little things are important. When Barney interrupts dutifully recited, salubrious conversations from his youth because he has forgotten the name for a spaghetti strainer, it not only makes for a disjointed narrative, it also and simultaneously casts doubt on the accuracy of the tale. After all, if he cannot remember these little details, how can he recall the others so vividly? Richler invites the reader to consider the Cohn-like "contrived mnemonic overkill" mentioned above by juxtaposing perfect retention with the fast fading memory. At the same time, he shows us what it is like to have a narrator who is realistically forgetful, and hints at the stultifying consequences that this can have for the tale itself. An entire novel told in this "tip-of-my-tongue" mode would be rather dreary.

We soon learn why he cares enough about the details to muddy the narrative waters: "these increasingly frequent bouts of memory loss are driving me crazy," he says (ibid., 11). And being able to recite such tidbits of trivia as the names of

the Seven Dwarves are Barney's little proofs, against all evidence, that he is still mentally agile, still "with it". We realize very soon, even before Barney's Alzheimer's has been confirmed to us, that this is a race to write against a fading memory. These insignificant chunks of trivia are important as they represent not only recapturing the past but also affirming Barney's mental state in the present.

With the first-person narrator, Richler has Barney revel in self-deprecation, reaping the sympathy that comes with flaunting one's faults.<sup>2</sup> In his other novels Richler used the omniscient narrator to display the faults of his characters, while never outright condemning anti-heroes like the conniving Duddy of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* or quixotic Solomon of *Solomon Gursky Was Here*. With the movement in his final novel out of the third-person world, we come closer to the main character as we gaze at the present through Barney's windshield, with a view to his rear-view mirror regrets. This combination of proximity and self-deprecation fosters sympathy. Looking back on his years, and his sillier, younger self, Barney refers to his "wasted life," calls his book a "sorry attempt at autobiography" (ibid., 52), and though he "dislike[s] most people [he's] ever met," he does so "not nearly so much as [he is] disgusted by the Rt. Dishonourable Barney Panofsky" (ibid., 166) – he also incessantly reminds the reader that he is a first-timer, so we should not expect much. Why write about yourself then?

The novel tells this why in the first lines: "Terry's the spur. The splinter under my fingernail. To come clean, I'm starting on this shambles that is the true story of my wasted life [...] as a riposte to the scurrilous charges" made in the rival's autobiography (ibid., 1). Terry McIver, a successful CanLiterato Barney had known back in his halcyon days in Paris, has both slandered Barney and sent him "an advance copy of *Of Time and Fevers*" (ibid., 23). Turning to his lawyer, the drinking buddy who has aided him greatly in the past, Barney asks,

"Can I sue somebody for libel who has accused me, in print, of being a wife-abuser, an intellectual fraud, a purveyor of pap, a drunk with a penchant for violence, and probably a murder as well?"

"Sounds like he got things just about right, I'd say." (ibid., 23f)

The pen will be mightier than the legal sword because the lawyer refuses to wield that sword. So becomes Barney the reluctant writer of his memoirs; thus is the act of writing removed from a hallowed sphere, cheapened by the fact that it is a second choice, an option Barney turns to only because the door to the law remains blocked.

Unreliable Barney is making a confession in the style of the wise old man looking back on his mistakes, but also in a more specific sense: Barney is the only one who might know what happened to his friend Boogie; Boogie, who was last seen jumping off a dock at Barney's cottage in the Laurentians, not long after sleeping with Barney's second wife, as Barney, baroquely intoxicated, fired gunshots over the swimmer's head. Thus we have general confessions in the style of St. Augustine told by "a lucid narrator turning back on a past self steeped in ignorance, confusion, and delusion" (Cohn, 145). When Barney expresses regret at having ruined his third marriage, or bemoans his "wasted life", we have the

common literary topos of the developed self recognizing what he could have done differently in life. But what keeps the pages turning in this novel is the possibility of a second type of confession, a confession to murder. Though Barney, for all his openness regarding his other sins, adamantly maintains that he is not Boogie's murderer, they never did find the body... The result of this protesting too much is a variation on the liar paradox: if Barney does not confess to the crime, can we really trust a self-proclaimed hypocrite? Or a murderer for that matter? This, coupled with his bad memory, makes Barney the unreliable narrator par excellence.

Counterbalancing Barney's overt subjectivity is a (somewhat) neutral observer. Barney's son Michael has acted as editor to the memoirs, sorting and ordering them, adding notes where deemed necessary, and providing an Afterword in his own name. We have the best of both worlds: the insider's view of what went on in Barney's mind, and a more objective fact-checker. Having an editor check the facts should add to the truth claim by exposing lies, corroborating claims made against hard evidence. Punctilious Michael intrudes throughout the novel as an avid footnoter, verifying, refuting or doubting details, cross-examining Barney, with the grating lead-in of "actually...". When Barney refers to a "battered Renault *deux-chevaux*," Michael notes "*Actually*, the 2CV was a Citroën"; when Barney misattributes the definition of existential hell, Michael clarifies "*Actually*, it was Jean-Paul Sartre" who said "Hell is other people" (Richler, 5, 44; my emphasis). Adding to the strange footnote wording is what Michael chooses to correct. Footnote 1 corrects the spelling of a stripper's name, Footnote 2 takes us to hockey trivia: "Actually, [Maurice the Rocket] Richard finished fourth in the scoring race. Ted Lindsay, of the Detroit Red Wings, won the title with twenty-three goals and fifty-five assists. Sid Abel came second, Gordie Howe third, and then Richard" (*ibid.*, 3).

Michael is not a professional editor; rather he was summoned to the job by Barney's will and testament. This accounts for the sophomoric form and content of the notes, and it is because Michael is a greenhorn as an editor that his intrusions are often risibly trivial. In addition to assuring the purity of exotic dancer nomenclature and ancient hockey scoring championships Michael informs us, among other things, that, "\$375 plus 6 times 20 actually equals \$495" (*ibid.*, 270) not the \$500 claimed by a character in the novel; "Dopey and Bashful" (*ibid.*, 282) are the two dwarves eluding Barney, and that in Barney's meticulous descriptions of a sexual fantasy starring his beloved Miss. Ogilvy, the teacher's "[p]leated brown" skirt was "Described as a "tartan skirt" on page 12" (*ibid.*, 238). Barney's obsession with detail is thus played out again in his son's footnotes. The reader could be forgiven for wondering "who cares about this minutia!" and that is exactly the point. Barney's mild gaffes and inconsistencies are irrelevant to the broader truth-claim. These silly, pedantic footnotes show us that facts and details can not always lead us to truth.<sup>3</sup>

The sum of these sins of trivial inclusion and omission is that as a footnoter Michael is useless; as a son he is his father's redeemer, a key witness to his father's reliability when Barney looks honestly at his own life. Though overwhelmed by Barney's shambles, Michael neatly skewers the passages in CanLiterato Terry McIver's autobiography *Of Time and Fevers* quoted by his

father. He does this by comparing the published text with McIver's original manuscript, which he unearths from the vaults of an Alberta university. Terry had known Barney in Paris. He had also known Barney's first wife, a suicide who was later hailed as a great artist. Terry's published comment is parenthetical, but polished to Terry's favour: "I would rather slit my wrists, as poor Clara did (Clara, whose prodigious talent I was one of the first to recognize) [...]" (ibid., 101). Michael notes that this is a slight change from the original "unsuccessfully, *faute de mieux*, like everything else she has undertaken" (ibid., 101). In other words, Terry has bowdlerized his autobiography. Similarly, where Parisian McIver had written Barney "is a violent man", his autobiography, published after Barney's trial for murder, continues, "capable of murder one day, I fear" (ibid., 105). Barney may be a liar, but Terry is a pretentious liar, one who retroactively attempts to add prescience to his talents.

But Barney disappoints. Drunk and violent, he is no murderer. Though he claims that even as a Bohemian in Paris he "[h]ad no artistic pretensions whatsoever" and had vowed never to write, this is not true. Barney is hardly illiterate, not really virginal in his writerly pursuits (Michael found some youthful attempts in his father's files) and far less unaware of narrative form than he claims to be (ibid., 2). In other words, he is not entirely unreliable, undependable, as an author. Barney mocks the reader by building suspense, even while claiming the opposite. A few pages before his pages end (and Michael's Afterword begins) he notes, "Were I a real writer, I would have shuffled the deck of my memoirs so that this would be a real nail-biter. [...] But you already know I was adjudged innocent [...]" (ibid., 365). Yes and no. We know that he did not spend his best years in jail, but there is a possibility that he got away with the perfect crime. Focusing on the letter of the law ("I was adjudged innocent") highlights the possibility that he has lied to us throughout. After all, they never did find the body...

Perhaps the truth will out, but that does not mean that the truth will be linear, and "would have shuffled the deck" is a howler given how scattered this narrative is. The reference to shuffling reminds us that he is well aware of the writer's task – making order out of chaos – and equally aware that that is exactly what he is doing. He not only orders reality, he also makes things up, suspends the "boundary between recollection and creation" (Stanzel, 215). If Terry was the spur to the memoirs, Barney is at least as capable of moulding that past as is Terry.

After one passage Barney admits, "maybe that didn't happen and it's just a case of my tinkering with memory, fine-tuning reality. [...] To come clean, I'm a natural-born burnisher. But, then, what's a writer, even a first-timer like me?" (ibid., 233f). In other words, like all writers, Barney is a liar. What is more, he is a liar with a motive, as the alternative world of created reality is a welcome escape from his own past: "Oh Barney, you bastard. When I try to reconstruct those days, failing memory is an enormous blessing" (ibid., 193). That a hazy memory can be a blessing is re-iterated later on, again highlighting a difference between Barney and that other autobiographer, Terry McIver: "Arguably the days my memory functions perfectly are heavier to bear than those when it fails me" (ibid., 316). McIver bathes in his past, Barney is haunted by his.

The distortion of reality is made of two strands: Barney willingly distorts the truth of his past, and his memory fails him. Towards the third part of the novel, Richler weaves these strands together, teasing the reader with a near-confession to the murder of Boogie:

I have wakened more than once recently no longer certain of what really happened that day on the lake. Wondering if I had corrected the events of that day even as I have embellished other incidents in my life. (ibid., 315)

This should be the anagnorises, the grand recognition. Here you would expect Barney to confront his reality, to finally admit. Isn't that what autobiographies are supposed to be about? Revisiting one's own past in order to come to terms with it? Of course, that does not happen. That can not happen because such an admission depends on memory and Barney has Alzheimer's – this is not a personal coming-to-clarity (development), but a sad decline: “Bad days my memory functions no better than an out-of-focus kaleidoscope, but other days my recall is painfully perfect” (ibid., 388). In his own life he is bandied between blissful oblivion and painful remembrances of things past.

Barney the memoir-writer literarily and literally fades away from the text. Not long before the Afterword Michael writes, in the most useful footnote: “I fear that by this juncture my father's memory was unreliable, even somewhat scrambled, and that pages of this manuscript were put together in a haphazard fashion [...]” (ibid., 386). The truth can't out, it seems. It has been buried with Barney. It is because of this that Michael has to step in to write the Afterword, because of this that Michael, not Barney, has the last word on Barney's life.

For such a meandering novel, with such an unreliable narrator, this has the detective novel's clean ending – it is “The Case of the Missing Swimmer”, as Barney jokingly refers to his life-story (ibid., 334). On the final page, after Boogie's corpse has finally been found near Barney's cottage, after Barney has died and his charitable will read out, after the children (except for one, the ever-faithful Kate, Cordelia to Barney's Lear) have become convinced that Barney is a murderer – that he was not telling the truth – the truth outs. A mere page from the end, the editor/son pleads with faithful Kate: “Kate, please. Don't start. He was my father, too. But when he wrote again and again that he was still expecting Boogie to turn up one day, he was obviously lying” (416). We seem to have the clean ending, the murderer has been found.

However, the murderer is not Barney. After “convicting” his father in print, Michael the son re-enacts Barney's days at the cottage:

I was sitting on the porch, remembering old times, when suddenly a big fat water bomber came roaring in. It lowered onto the lake and, without even stopping, scooped up who knows how many tons of water, flew off, and dumped the water on the mountain. (ibid., 417)

Just as it had, years before, scooped up and dumped Boogie on the mountain. Where memory failed, conclusive evidence enters. James Shapiro, writing in the *New York Times*, protests against this *deus ex machina* ending: “But just as it seems that Richler moves toward a greater skepticism about the trustworthiness

of memory, he backs away, and in the end tries to have it both ways” (Shapiro, 4). To the melody of “you can’t know” there is a contrapuntal “so that’s what happened!” The ending may be too neat for some tastes, but it suits Barney’s “cherished beliefs [that] life was absurd, and nobody ever truly understood anybody else” (Richler, 417). Richler does “have it both ways,” both adhering to and refuting Barney’s philosophy: being “murdered” by a water bomber (or being accused of that murder) is absurd, but the conclusion offered here is comic, redemptive. There is order and truth after all. Limiting confusion and the existence, as well as revelation of, truth are not mutually exclusive. This order instills a Barney-like regret in Michael: “But, oh God, it’s too late for Barney. He’s beyond understanding now. Damn damn damn” (Richler, 417). Still, in one of those damn’s lies redemption for Barney, and an affirmation of truth’s existence.

### Endnotes

1. “Norms” is a clumsy word that encompasses “theme”, “meaning”, “ontology” and other such grails residing in the literary work; for Booth “the implied author includes not only the extractable meanings but also the moral and emotional content of each bit of action and suffering of all of the characters” (Booth, 73). Chatman argues less “morally” that the implied author is “reconstructed by the reader from the narrative” (Chatman, 148), i.e. it and has more to do with structure than with morals.

2. As with most of Richler’s novels critics sang the familiar strophic accusation of autobiography. It is no revelation to point out that Richler’s St. Urbain boys got older as he himself aged. The accusation of autobiography is particularly tempting here since this was Richler’s first first-person novel. Because this paper focuses on Alzheimer’s, a malady Richler did not suffer from, I relegate these undoubtedly fruitful speculations to the endnotes. Also, as Richler reminded one interviewer, the flesh-and-blood author was never accused of murder.

3. Michael’s footnotes are as salient for what they do not correct, for the potholes not filled. These include a 1960s Toronto already plagued with joggers, as well as Heinrich Heine and Oscar Wilde snuggling up in the same Paris cemetery. To further confuse things, as Thomas Edwards points out, “[n]ot all the errors Michael detects are erroneous” (Edwards). There is a randomness to what is corrected. Even the footnotes depend on subjectivity, albeit Michael’s rather than Barney’s.

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