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The Forces of Life and Death in Roch Carrier's Fiction

Abstract

Carrier's fiction is based on exaggeration and the grotesque, but it also deals with serious questions: the forces of life and death in the lives of his characters. Death is the subject of *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* and of several short stories, and it is symbolically present in certain other works. In *Le Deux-millième étage* and *Il est par là, le soleil*, life in the city is equated with death. None of Carrier's characters live happy lives, and their religion is one of death and sin. As French-Canadians, they are threatened with destruction by the English-speaking world and by American capitalism. Yet they affirm their will to live by clinging to life; they react against their religion of death by blaspheming, and, in some cases, by openly rejecting it. They express their will to live through their sexual activity and by their humour. As a community, they show their will to survive by remembering their past. Jean-Thomas in *Il n'y a pas de pays sans grand-père*, by talking of the past, keeps it alive and passes on to his grandson the will to survive as a French-Canadian. Telling stories which others will remember is thus a way of cheating death.

Keywords

Roch Carrier, life, death, dying, *La Guerre, Yes Sir*, *Le Deux-millième étage*, *Il est par là le soleil*, sin, capitalism, humor, past, Jean-Thomas, *Il n'y a pas de pays sans grand-père*, story telling

THE FORCES OF LIFE AND DEATH IN ROCH CARRIER'S FICTION

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In the space of fifteen years, Roch Carrier has established a reputation as one of the finest writers of fiction in Quebec. His first work, *Jolis Deuils* (1964), is a collection of short stories, some of which are only a couple of pages long, and which relate a series of tragic events in a highly poetic style.¹ This collection was followed by a trilogy of novels depicting the lives of various characters from the same Quebec village. The first of the three, *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* (1968), examines the impact of the Second World War on this village. Carrier shows how, suddenly, the reality of war is brought home to the villagers when the body of Corriveau, one of their number who has been killed in action, is returned for burial. The same day that Corriveau's body arrives, accompanied by a group of English soldiers, Bérubé, another villager who has joined the army, returns with his bride Molly, a prostitute whom he met in Newfoundland. The next novel in the trilogy, *Floralie, où es-tu?* (1969), goes farther into the past and describes the marriage of Corriveau's parents, Floralie and Anthyme. The couple are separated in the forest as Anthyme takes his wife home from the wedding, and, after a night of wandering and nightmare, they are reunited in Anthyme's village. *Il est par là, le soleil* (1970), the third volume in the trilogy, follows the misfortunes of Philibert, the son of the gravedigger in the first novel, as he leaves home and moves to the city. He goes from one menial and pointless task to another, until, finally on the brink of success, he dies in a car accident. While writing this trilogy, Carrier also published a group of short stories called "Contes pour mille oreilles" (1969), which have themes similar to those in his first volume of short fiction.

Other novels were to follow. In 1973, came *Le deux-millième étage*, the story of a man who owns an old apartment building in a poor district of a city (probably Montreal), and who refuses to allow it to be demolished for a new building project. *Le Jardin des délices* (1975) is set in the same village as Carrier's first two novels, and it tells of how a confidence man persuades the villagers that there is gold on their land and sells them shares in a fictitious mining company. Interwoven with this story is that of the local lawyer, who, because he wanted to return to earth after his death, was buried with most of his worldly wealth. The most recent of Carrier's novels, *Il n'y a pas de pays sans grand-père* (1977), is narrated by an old man, confined to his rocking-chair, who laments the softness and decadence of modern Québécois. The only person with whom he can communicate is his grandson, and, when the latter is arrested at a demonstration against the Queen's visit to Quebec, the old man decides to rescue him. Brandishing his hunting knife, he hijacks a bus and sets off to Quebec City. Finally, he is overpowered, put in a straight jacket and sent to a mental institution. In 1979, Carrier published *Les Enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*, a collection of short stories inspired by his childhood.

Summaries such as these cannot convey how Carrier's fiction grips the reader. He is a *raconteur* who uses an amazing combination of caricature, exaggeration and the grotesque to create a very special world. He himself has admitted: "My novels revel in the unlikely; I love exaggeration, I love force, I love the epic."² But he is also careful to point out that a writer's flights of imagination do not necessarily divorce him from reality. While admitting the importance of imagination in his works, he adds: "When I say imaginary, I do not create a distinction between the imaginary world and the one we call the real world; by imaginary, I mean the real world perceived more globally by the novel, with all its possibilities and its meanings."³ Interestingly enough, Carrier dates his vocation as a novelist from the time when, at the age of twelve, he read *Candide*.⁴ It need hardly be added that, in this work, Voltaire used the grotesque and the exaggerated to say some very serious things about the nature of life. Carrier, too, through his use of what one critic has called "fantastical realism,"⁵ is an equally serious writer. His work in one of its most important aspects, is an examination of the very forces of life, and of the forces of death which oppose them.

The presence of death as a theme in these works should be no surprise, for, as Margaret Atwood puts it, "the general Canadian

predilection for coffins" is, in Quebec literature, "intensified almost to a mania."⁶ And, indeed, in *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, the coffin containing Corriveau's body is at the center of the most important scene: a wake held in his memory. The arrival of the coffin represents the intrusion of death into the lives of the villagers, and, from the moment Corriveau's body arrives, death is foremost in every character's consciousness. In certain of the short stories, death is equally important. "La Main" ("Contes pour mille oreilles," pp. 144-45) describes a huge dead hand which descends over a town, blocking out all warmth and light. The hero of "Les Lunettes" (*ibid.*, pp. 151-54) acquires a pair of spectacles which change his view of the world: his secretary appears as a skeleton, his car becomes a hearse pulled by skeletal horses, the city streets look desolate and ruined, and when he enters what he believes is his home, he discovers that it is his coffin. In "La Chambre nuptiale,"⁷ a newly-married couple discover that they have become aged and corpse-like.

Frequently death has a symbolic presence. Many of Carrier's works are set in winter, for example, and the cold and snow can be seen as symbols of death (as Margaret Atwood points out, winter often plays this role in Canadian novels).⁸ The whole of *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* takes place in winter, as does much of *Le Jardin des délices*. In the latter, the approach of winter is linked explicitly to death through references to dead moose carried off by hunters, the "dry bones" of the trees, and the long nights. Obviously, night, too, is symbolic of death, and nearly all of *Floralie, où es-tu?* takes place at night, while the wake in *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* and several scenes of *Le Jardin des délices* are set at night.

Sometimes it is the dull routine of life in the city which Carrier equates with death. In "Le Téléphone," (*Jolis Deuils*, pp. 129-34), a man wears himself out by repeating the same formula every time the telephone rings in the office of a large company. After his death, his wife takes over the task, until she, too, dies. "Le métro" (*ibid.*, pp. 141-46) tells of a man traveling to work in the subway, who suddenly realizes that he and all the other passengers have grown old, worn away by the routine of existence in the city. But it is in the life of Philibert from *Il est par là, le soleil* that death and the city are most closely linked. From his earliest childhood, Philibert is haunted by death, for his father is both the village butcher and its gravedigger. The opening pages of the novel are full of the images which obsess the child's mind: a hunter who decapitates ducks caught in a frozen lake, slaughtered pigs hanging up while being gutted, times spent helping

his father dig graves. When Philibert goes to the city, he finds himself repeating these experiences of death, since he is forced to work in places which strongly resemble the grave. He works at digging up roads, peeling potatoes in a dark restaurant basement, scrubbing floors under restaurant tables and repairing cars in the grease pit of a garage. Even his sexual urges—the very affirmation of life—are not allowed free expression. He does not have the money to court the beautiful bank clerk who catches his eye, so he pays the restaurant owner for a joyless coupling with his wife.

In *Le deux-millième étage*, the impersonal destructive force of city living is centered on the machines which are sent to destroy Dorval's apartments. One of Dorval's tenants, Barnabé, illustrates particularly well the effect of such machines. Barnabé is determined to become a mechanic, because, he says: "A man in our times is not a man, but a slave if he cannot dominate the machine."⁹ Unfortunately, he fails all his correspondence course examinations and seems to be robbed even of his virility. When he tries to work a bulldozer, he is totally baffled by it, and his wife shouts "Impotent!" at him.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the machines advance inexorably upon the apartments, destroying them and filling the air with the smell of rotten wood, old plaster and brick dust. The mindless destruction is represented principally by the bulldozer, which remains impervious to the characters' feelings. When Dorval pours beer in its fuel tank, this ridiculously human gesture has no effect.

Dorval's solution to the problems posed by modern capitalist society is a simplistic form of communism (he does not even realize that, as a property owner, he, too, is part of the system). But Carrier's point is that, whatever changes are made to society, the fundamental problems of life remain. As one character says: "After the Revolution, my damned apples will still go rotten!"¹¹ No revolution can hide the pointlessness of a life in which men must die. "A man's life isn't worth a fart," to quote Barnabé.¹² Behind the social concerns of novels like *Le deux-millième étage* lurk more fundamental problems. Corriveau's mother, in front of her son's coffin, wonders what use it is spending one's life producing and rearing children when they must all die. In *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* Henri has a dream which conveys the fate of all mankind: he sees a huge coffin into which the inhabitants of the village march, followed by those from neighbouring villages and by crowds from all over the world.

This is not an optimistic view of life, but Roch Carrier's characters do not lead happy lives. They die in wars, they are

exploited by employers and they barely manage to scratch a living from the soil. "Life is a curse," Philibert comments,¹³ and, when one of the workers on the construction site deliberately blows himself up, Philibert approves of the act, seeing it as less stupid than docile acceptance of a life of misery. But this sombre view of existence is lightened by Carrier's obvious pity for his characters and for mankind. He does not revel in the dismal picture he paints, but shows great warmth for a humanity which must suffer and die. This feeling is best expressed in the scene in *Le Jardin des délices* where two drunken villagers dig up the lawyer's grave to get at his wealth. Although terrified by the dark graveyard, they are still able to show their pity when they see the lawyer's body. They burst into tears, and one of them exclaims: "Damn it, death is sad!" "Damn it, life is sad," replies the other.¹⁴

It has always been the task of religion to deal with problems such as these, but, in Carrier's works, religion is itself depicted as a morbid force, even as a form of death worship. The priests in his novels constantly warn the faithful that death stalks them and that they must always bear that in mind. "My brothers," says the priest in *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, "never forget that we live to die and that we die to live."¹⁵ In *Il est par là, le soleil*, the couple with whom Philibert lodges introduces him one day into a dark room lit only by a candle. In the middle is a coffin containing the remains of their dead child, before whom they come to pray. When Philibert asks what is in the coffin, they murmur: "It is life."¹⁶

Associated with this exaltation of death is an attempt by the Church to frighten men. Carrier sees religion, not as a liberating force, but as one which imprisons through fear of sin. During Corriveau's funeral, the priest gives a lurid description of the torments of hell, and tells his listeners: "Because you are men and women, because the flesh is weak, you are condemned to perish in the flames of Hell, to perish without end unless God in His infinite goodness forgives your sins."¹⁷ The priests in *Floralie, où es-tu?* and *Le Jardin des délices* preach essentially the same message, and its effect is to replace enjoyment of life with fear of death. The children in "Les Fantômes du temps des feuilles mortes" (*Les Enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*, pp. 45-50) are terrified of ghosts; Henri in *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* fears that the dead Corriveau is wandering around the house; Anthyme's childhood is marred by nights of terror spent cowering under his bed; Floralie sees Hell and demons everywhere. These characters are all taught to see life as a battle between

God and the Devil. The traveling actors in *Floralie, où es-tu?* sum up this view of existence when they perform a mystery play. "We are the Seven Deadly Sins," announces one of them. "We are the kings of the earth, we reign over the world."¹⁸

This kind of religion destroys life, and nowhere is this better illustrated than in the scene from *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* in which Corriveau's sister appears at the wake. Esmalda is a nun who has not seen her family for many years. She knocks on the window at a time when the villagers, warmed by Anthyme's cider and Floralie's baking, are beginning to forget that they are in the presence of death. The noise reduces them to terrified silence, and, when the window is opened, a blast of cold air chills them. Esmalda immediately delivers dire warnings of death and damnation, her smile revealing decayed teeth which symbolize her role as the representative of death.

The Church is also equated with death because, by associating sex with sin, it suppresses one of the life forces. Hence, Bérubé is about to go to bed with Molly when he hears a clock ticking in Hell. It seems to say: "Always, never,"¹⁹ and he sees in his mind's eye the souls of the damned tormented by flames and serpents. Naturally, his sexual urge dies, and he can revive it only by making it legitimate in the eyes of the Church: he asks Molly to marry him. Anthyme in *Floralie, où es-tu?* has lived a life of abstinence and frustration through fear of sin, and, when he realizes that Floralie is not a virgin, he concludes that she must be damned. "I am not even a man," he decides when he knows that Floralie has had a lover before him.²⁰ His loss of virility is confirmed when Floralie and his horse (which symbolizes his "animal" instincts) pass into the hands of Néron, a traveling medicine man who happens by when the couple are separated in the forest.

The religion which these characters practise is so unnatural that they scarcely understand its rituals. Their prayers are a hilarious muddle of misunderstood words, and the Hail Mary becomes: "Je vous salue, Marie, pleine et grasse" ("Hail Mary, pregnant and fat").²¹ Sometimes, however, a garbled prayer hits on the truth, as when one character prays: "Au fond, tu m'abimes, Seigneur, Seigneur" ("In the depths, You destroy me, O Lord, O Lord").²² And the God they worship is indeed destructive. He is also unjust, and one question which is posed in *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* is why He permits innocent young men to die in wars. Philibert wonders how his father can ill-treat him in the name of God, and when he finds no justice in life, he comments: "I've been given life without asking for it,

like a kick in the behind.”²³ Yet the Church tells people that they must thank God for His kindness. The most bitterly ironic scene in Carrier’s work is one in *Il est par là, le soleil* which describes a procession of sick and halt making its way to the church. They are led by the Laliberté family and their twenty-one hydrocephalic children pushed in wheelbarrows. They are going to give thanks for the twenty-one angels with whom their union has been blessed. As Philibert watches them, he pulls the legs off a grasshopper, thus unconsciously imitating the casual cruelty of God.

It is important to remember, however, that the religion and the God depicted in Carrier’s novels are presented as belonging to a particular community. His characters, as well as being individuals, are French-Canadians, and their religion is the kind of medieval Catholicism practised until quite recently in Quebec. The nightmares and religious fears of people like Anthyme, Floralie, Bérubé and Philibert are those of a whole people, and their sad lives are those of many Québécois. In Carrier’s opinion, the people of Quebec have always led an unhappy existence, and, writing of the work of another Quebec novelist, he says something which applies to any one of his own novels: “Quebec is as sad as this book.”²⁴ The background of his novels, while clearly Quebec, is kept vague in order to make it representative of the whole province. For this reason, the village where most of the works take place is never named, and the apartment building in *Le deux-millième étage* is any such building in a poor district of Montreal.

As a community, Carrier’s French-Canadians are threatened primarily by the English-speaking world. Corriveau is killed in a war forced on him by the English, and, in this respect, he represents all French-Canadians, for whom the English are death. The English soldiers who bring back Corriveau’s body typify this threat.²⁵ They incarnate death because they are English and because they are soldiers. They are trained to be robots who obey the sergeant’s orders without question and who are impervious to the warmth of the French-Canadians. Indeed, they despise the villagers as “turbulent, undisciplined and crazy pigs.”²⁶ In the army they treat French-Canadians no better. Henri sweeps the barracks floors and Bérubé (together with Italians, Greeks, Poles, Hungarians and other “foreigners”) cleans the latrines.

Carrier’s characters never really understand why they are involved in a war, and Floralie does not even realize that the Union Jack on her son’s coffin is “her” flag. Joseph tries to escape the war

by cutting off his hand, a symbolic castration and loss of the life forces. His wife asks: "What will my Joseph do in my bed with his stump of an arm?"²⁷ and to her husband she says: "A man who hasn't the courage to go to war to protect his country isn't a man."²⁸ Other characters are mutilated mentally and spiritually. Bérubé, for example, is turned into an automaton who mechanically obeys the sergeant's orders to help expel the French-Canadians from the wake. He tries later to pray beside Corriveau's coffin, but the villagers turn him away. When he joins the soldiers to pray in English, they, too, reject him. He now belongs to neither community.

Québécois face death as a people because the English have dispossessed them in their own land. In *Il n'y a pas de pays sans grand-père* Vieux-Thomas still remembers being prevented from fishing in a lake because it belonged to English-Canadians. When Philibert arrives in the city and tries to earn money by sweeping sidewalks in an English district, one lady is amazed that he cannot speak English. She concludes that he must be an Italian immigrant, and she laments that such people are allowed into the country without learning its language. In *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* the dispossession of French-Canadians is summed up in the scene in which the English soldiers, unable to bear the disgusting manners of the French-Canadians, eject them from Corriveau's house.

Even the forces of capitalism which exploit characters like Philibert are seen as English, or, at least, Anglo-American. Giving his tenants a lesson on capitalism, Dorval asks: "What language does the voice of capitalism speak?" and then answers his own question: "It speaks English."²⁹ Vieux-Thomas, in his youth, worked for an English company, and was insulted and ordered about in English. Philibert, when he inherits some money, decides to set up a business, but first he must learn English, for, "If you don't know English, you can't even go for a piss when you want to."³⁰ His failure is due largely to the fact that he is a French-Canadian in an English capitalist system. This is made clear when he reads a newspaper article explaining that French-Canadians suffer from a fascination with failure. The Laterreur brothers in *Le deux-millième étage* turn this fascination into a kind of success. They are wrestlers who make money by deliberately losing their fights, and thereby ensure that the frustration and anger of the spectators is turned harmlessly against the winners of the fights rather than against their real exploiters.

Yet all is not death and failure in Carrier's work, for he deals with life as well. The characters affirm their will to live in the face of

death; they gather to drink, laugh and dance in the tavern in *Le Jardin des délices* despite the winter forces outside; they gather at Corriveau's wake in *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* to express their relief at being alive themselves. The latter gathering especially turns into a Rabelaisian celebration of life as the villagers eat, drink and exchange salacious stories. This is done as a reaction against the presence of death symbolized by the coffin, but also against the English soldiers, to whom Anthyme says: "We know how to live."³¹ Dorval echoes these words as he cries to the demolishers: "I am alive."³² For him, the symbol of life is the beer with which he fortifies himself and his tenants, as it is in *Le Jardin des délices*, in which the villagers drink it in large quantities in the tavern, and in *Floralie, où es-tu?*, where it is poured over the sleeping couple when they are discovered in the morning. The cider that Anthyme offers the mourners is another such symbol, for it is described as full of "the marvelous forces of the earth."³³

Several of Carrier's characters prefer life as it is now, with all its suffering and misery, to a hypothetical afterlife. The women usually cling to the religion of death, but the men often reject this religion, question the justice of God and even deny His existence. One of the men at the wake says: "It's not my boy who's in the coffin, but I wonder: if there is a God, why does he insist on sending back children in those boxes?"³⁴ Anthyme tends to agree and is far less willing than his wife to see the hand of God in events. After Esmalda leaves, Floralie exclaims: "She's a saint!," but Anthyme's only comment is: "Let's close that window quick!"³⁵ He and the other men display their rejection of God in the litanies of blasphemy which pour from their lips. It is taken as a sign that a boy has become a man when he blasphemes. Hence, when Philibert begins to swear, his father tells him: "Now you're a man. You can speak like a man."³⁶

But blasphemy is not total rejection of God, for, to take His name in vain implies belief in His existence. Anthyme's revolt is more fundamental than this, and its origin is seen in *Floralie, où es-tu?* During his night of wandering in the forest, Anthyme learns to overcome his religious nightmares and to cling to the earth—a decision symbolized by his act of pulling up a handful of grass to suck, and finding that "In his mouth, it was fresh and good."³⁷ He questions the justice of God, wondering why he, who has always tried to observe God's laws, should be punished. Then he climbs a tree and issues a challenge: "God, I say You're not just. . . . If You think I'm lying, come down and get me: we'll settle this business like men."³⁸

When there is no answer, Anthyme realizes that God is powerless against him. "I've understood Your game," he says, "You're afraid of a man who's not afraid of You."³⁹ When Anthyme walks off after this discovery, "his feet are set down solidly and without hesitation."⁴⁰

Philibert comes to the same conclusions as Anthyme. He says: "One day I realized there was no more a God in Heaven than electric rattlesnakes in Quebec."⁴¹ This means that only life here and now counts, or as Philibert says: "God doesn't exist, but I exist."⁴² Dorval too rejects God, for he believes that man needs no God to be happy; he merely has to fulfil his basic needs. "If a man sleeps well, eats well, and if his intestines want to empty themselves at least once a day, I proclaim him a happy man."⁴³ He argues that man must keep his feet firmly on the ground and avoid seeking happiness in Heaven. Relating how, during the war, he parachuted into France, he describes his terror at no longer having his feet on solid ground. "I love the Earth," he explains. "I was made with earth and, when I'm unmade, I'll become earth again."⁴⁴ The lawyer in *Le Jardin des délices* loves the earth so much that he is determined to come back to it after his death. What he and the villagers who seek gold on their land dimly realize is that they must look earthwards for the only real wealth. There may not literally be gold in the earth, but the earth itself is the only gold necessary.

Characters like these learn the lesson which Carrier describes in "Les Médailles flottent-elles sur la mer?" (*Les Enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*, pp. 137-41). Here he tells how, when he was a child, he wore dozens of holy medals around his neck. One day, he realized that they were too heavy, so he threw them away. His characters learn that all prophets are charlatans, like Néron the quack doctor in *Floralie, où es-tu?*; that all prophets lie, like J. J. Bourdage with his promises of gold. They discover, like Carrier himself in "Le jour où je devins un apostat" (*Les Enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*, pp. 37-44), that the "miracles" of religion are just fables.

Besides this conscious rejection of religion, there is also, however, an instinctive rejection of death. Carrier's characters react to death by expressing their sexual urges. As Dorval puts it: "Wanting to make love is a sign of life: the dead don't have that kind of urge."⁴⁵ Even Philibert longs for love, and his last thoughts before he dies are of the beautiful bank clerk. Amidst death and destruction, people go on asserting their will to live through sex. In the ruins of the demolished buildings, Dorval discovers two adolescents making love, and they tell him: "We're taking advantage of life before it makes us

too unhappy.”⁴⁶ It is worth noting that even Dorval’s communism is inspired by his love for a girl communist whom he met in the French Resistance.

In *Le Jardin des délices*, the two men who dig up the lawyer’s grave keep their fears at bay by thinking of the pictures of naked women they have seen on calendars. When Henri and his wife in *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* see Corriveau’s coffin taken past their house, their reaction is to go to bed and make love. As Molly and Bérubé make love in the room above the coffin, “It was death which they violently stabbed.”⁴⁷ Molly, in fact, incarnates sex and life, and her presence at the wake counteracts Esmalda’s. The two women stand in direct contrast: Esmalda with her talk of death, her decayed teeth and her insistence on letting the cold into the room; Molly with her voluptuous body, her warmth and her ability to console. Miss Catéchime, the catechism teacher in *Le Jardin des délices*, plays a role similar to Molly’s, for she reveals the pleasures of sex to the priest. Even the old woman who lives in one of Dorval’s apartments discovers sex and becomes the most popular worker in Mignonne Fleury’s brothel.

The role of sex in Carrier’s fiction is conveyed humorously in *Le Jardin des délices* in the incident of the “zizis japonais”—tiny wax models of penises which suddenly appear in the village. The places where they are found are particularly important. Often they appear in the snow, which is symbolic of death. One of them is found in the Church tabernacle, the very center of the institution from which emanates the religion of death. The first one is seen by Miss Catéchime, whose task as catechism teacher, we are told, is to reveal the secrets of life. (Something she does very proficiently for the priest.) We finally learn that these wax models were made by a teacher who molded them on his pupils’ naked bodies. Of course, the priest interprets them as a plague sent by God to punish the villagers.

This incident is important because of its humor, for humor is another way used by both Carrier and his characters to face death. The rich vein of grotesque comedy running through Carrier’s work lifts it above the gloom into which it would otherwise sink. His characters transcend the absurd cruelty of death by laughing at it and making it more bearable. The two men who dig up the lawyer’s body, for example, keep their spirits up and their fears at bay by joking about the man and his death. During the wake in *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* the mourners show the same sense of humor in the presence of death.

As well as affirming their will to live as individuals, the

characters in Carrier's novels have the will to survive as a group. They live in a harsh land and a cruel climate, but they struggle against them and endure. "We are not the race of those who give up," says the lawyer.⁴⁸ One character tells his fellow villagers that they should leave the land and seek an easier life, but another replies: "You can calmly say that as you smoke, but we never do it."⁴⁹ Against all odds, against a hostile environment and against a stronger culture, French-Canadians have survived and have maintained their own language and culture. In *Il n'y a pas de pays sans grand-père*, the old man's grandson reads him a passage from Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* which expresses this will to survive: "We came here three hundred years ago and we stayed . . . We have drawn a map of the new continent, from the Gaspé to Montreal, from Saint-Jean-d'Iberville to the Ungava, saying: here everything we have brought with us, our religion, our language, our virtues and even our weaknesses become sacred, untouchable things, which must remain to the end."⁵⁰

When they remember this past, this history of endurance, Vieux-Thomas and his grandson achieve a kind of victory over death by bringing the past alive. Carrier himself obviously loves Quebec and cherishes memories of his childhood there. *Les Enfants du bonhomme dans la lune* is essentially an attempt to revive that childhood and memories of the Quebec which formed him. For a culture to survive, it is important that the past not be forgotten, and the older characters in Carrier's works often possess a knowledge gleaned from the past which the younger ones lack. In "Le Secret perdu dans l'eau" (*Les Enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*, pp. 157-62), Carrier tells how his father once taught him the art of water divining, but he soon forgot it. Later, as an adult, he met an old man who talked of his father's skill as a water diviner, and Carrier was filled with sadness at having forgotten the art. "Along the roads I had taken since the village of my childhood, I had forgotten somewhere my father's knowledge," he says.⁵¹

Worse even than such forgetfulness is the defilement of the past experienced by Philibert's grandparents. Philibert loves this old couple, their stories of the past and the house which symbolizes their past. But, when the couple sell their house to provide their children with an inheritance, the children turn it into a pigsty and force them to live with the pigs. Vieux-Thomas in *Il n'y a pas de pays sans grand-père* is treated with similar disrespect: he is confined to his rocking chair by his daughter-in-law, has his pipe and hunting knife taken

from him and is continually mocked by the children of the house. He, in turn, despises the young and equates them with death and weakness. He views with horror the weapons of destruction and the wars which he sees every day on the television. People now, he believes, are obsessed with death, and are consequently unable to create. He dreams of his own youth when he built his home and his furniture. The young today are incapable of this, and they are not even interested in producing children. "When people don't make children any more, it's because people don't want to live any more," he says.⁵² Their animals are no better, for they have to be artificially inseminated with semen bought from the Government. "Soon," he concludes, "people, instead of making their own dung, will prefer to buy it in plastic bags."⁵³

The one exception to Vieux-Thomas's scorn is his grandson, Jean-Thomas. The latter's willingness to listen to Vieux-Thomas makes the old man rethink his past and listen to the younger man. As Jean-Thomas reads to him about Quebec's history, Vieux-Thomas remembers injustices he has suffered at the hands of the English. When his grandson is arrested, the old man begins to question why the Queen should come to Quebec. He puts aside his old fears, and, when he commandeers the bus, he rides through the English village which, at one time, he would never enter. But what is equally important is that Jean-Thomas learns from his grandfather and applies the old man's personal knowledge of the past to the present situation. Carrier writes: "Jean-Thomas needs the old men's remembrances. In Jean-Thomas's mouth, the old men's remembrances become the dreams of young men. His voice unites the past as it is told in old books with Vieux-Thomas's past; Jean-Thomas vows to make the future out of this past."⁵⁴

By talking of the past, Vieux-Thomas recaptures his youth. "Vieux-Thomas will tell the tale and, as usual, while he tells it, he will come alive again as if telling the tale of his youth brought back his youth."⁵⁵ The telling of stories is a reaction against death and oblivion, and this is why the characters in *Le Jardin des délices* gather in the depth of winter to tell stories and to talk of the past. By doing so, they seem to hold the cold at bay. "In the midst of winter," Carrier writes, "words maintain the warmth of life. The breath of words tries to chase away the breath of the wind."⁵⁶ While people remember the past it is not dead, just as Jean-Thomas is not abandoned in his prison as long as Vieux-Thomas thinks of him.

In this process of resisting death by talking of the past, the

listener is as important as the story-teller. Somebody must, like Jean-Thomas, listen to the old man's tales or they will be lost. Obviously, one way of bringing the past to the attention of others is to write it down, and this is exactly what Carrier does. In bringing before us these characters who incarnate the spirit of Quebec, he attempts to ensure his own survival and that of the French-Canadians of whom he writes. He makes them come alive, and he passes on to us the story of their indomitable spirit. He is doing the same as Louis Hémon, whom he quotes in *Il n'y a pas de pays sans grand-père*. He is doing what Jean-Thomas does: "As long as he hears himself speaking, he will not be dead. Words are not actual reality: thinking of a trout isn't holding it slippery and quivering in his hand, but words create a magic which revives dead things and brings to life what isn't yet alive. Words give life."⁵⁷

By writing of the past, Carrier can make Québécois aware of their heritage and help them prepare for the future. Talking of his decision to depict a certain Quebec of the past in *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, he says: "My Québécois brothers, do not see in this a return to the past or an evasion of the present, see rather a will to go towards the future."⁵⁸ He believes that, with his novels, he is assuming his role among many other Quebec writers who are preparing the future of their people. "By writing my novel," he says, "I take my place in a Quebec which has been dispossessed of its culture and which, little by little, is trying tenaciously to create a soul for itself."⁵⁹

It may be objected that Vieux-Thomas, with all his memories of the past, achieves nothing, since he is unable to liberate Jean-Thomas. This is true, but, at the end of the novel, although Vieux-Thomas and Jean-Thomas are both locked safely away, the reader remains. He has lived the lives of these two, and of the many characters in the other novels. He is the real listener who accepts Carrier's message and who realizes that, as individuals and as French-Canadians, Carrier's characters represent life in the midst of death. Nobody, having read these novels, can remain impervious to the message that men in general, and Québécois as a race, reject the forces of death. Man can never overcome death, but he will always go on resisting it, and novelists like Roch Carrier will celebrate this struggle. As Carrier himself says: "To write is to agree to play the great game of life, of love and of death where the soul is condemned to lose at the end of the game, and the novelist is he who never really accepts this role."⁶⁰

NOTES

1. I have used the following editions of Carrier's works in this article: *Jolis Deuils* (Montréal: Les Editions du Jour, 1964); *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* (Montréal: Les Editions du Jour, 1968); "Contes pour mille oreilles," *Ecrits du Canada Français*, 25 (1969), pp. 135–60; *Floralie, où es-tu?* (Montréal: Les Editions du Jour, 1969); *Il est par là, le soleil* (Montréal: Les Editions du Jour, 1970); *Le deux-millième étage* (Montréal: Les Editions du Jour, 1973); *Le Jardin des délices* (Montréal: Les Editions La Presse, 1975); *Il n'y a pas de pays sans grand-père* (Montréal: Alain Stanké, 1979); *Les Enfants du bonhomme dans la lune* (Montréal: Alain Stanké, 1979). All quotations from these texts are my own translations.
2. "Mes romans aiment l'in vraisemblance; j'aime la démesure, j'aime la force, j'aime l'épopée" Roch Carrier, "Comment suis-je devenu romancier?" in *Le Roman contemporain d'expression française*, ed. Antoine Naaman and Louis Painchaud (Sherbrooke: Université de Sherbrooke, 1971), p. 268.
3. "Quand je dis, imaginaire, je n'oppose pas ce monde à celui que l'on nomme le monde réel; par imaginaire, je veux dire, le monde réel perçu plus globalement avec toutes ses possibilités et ses significations par le roman." *Le Roman contemporain d'expression française*, p. 267.
4. *Le Roman contemporain d'expression française*, p. 269.
5. Ronald Sutherland, "Uses of the Grotesque," *Canadian Literature*, N° 50 (Autumn 1971), 87–88.
6. Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 222.
7. Roch Carrier, "La Chambre nuptiale," *Le Devoir*, 8 avril 1966, p. 20.
8. Margaret Atwood, p. 65.
9. "Un homme à notre époque c'est pas un homme, mais un esclave s'il sait pas dominer la machine." *Le deux-millième étage*, p. 12.
10. *Le deux-millième étage*, p. 41.
11. "Après la Révolution, mes maudites pommes vont encore pourrir!" *Le deux-millième étage*, p. 19.
12. "La vie d'un homme ne vaut pas un pet." *Le deux-millième étage*, p. 68.
13. "Vivre, c'est une malédiction." *Il est par là, le soleil*, p. 141.
14. "'Maudit que la mort est triste!' 'Maudit que la vie est triste!'" *Le Jardin des délices*, p. 19.
15. "Mes frères, n'oubliez jamais que nous vivons pour mourir et que nous mourons pour vivre." *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, p. 115.
16. "C'est la vie." *Il est par là, le soleil*, p. 81.
17. "Parce que vous êtes des hommes et des femmes, parce que la chair est faible,

- vous êtes condamnés à périr dans les flammes de l'enfer, périr sans périr, à moins que le Dieu infiniment bon, ne vous pardonne vos offenses." *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, p. 116.
18. "Nous sommes les Sept Péchés Capitaux. Nous sommes les rois de la terre, nous régnons sur le monde." *Floralie, où es-tu?*, p. 143.
19. "Toujours, jamais." *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, p. 38.
20. "Je ne suis même pas un homme." *Floralie, où es-tu?*, p. 43.
21. *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, p. 49.
22. *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, p. 110.
23. "On m'a donné la vie sans que je demande, comme un coup de pied au derrière." *Il est par là, le soleil*, p. 94.
24. "Le Québec est triste comme ce livre." Roch Carrier, "John O'Neil, *Je voudrais te parler de Jérémiah, d'Ozélina et de tous les autres*," *Etudes Françaises*, 4, N° 4 (mai 1968), 240.
25. It is unclear whether these soldiers are English-Canadian or whether they are from England. In any case, Carrier, like most Quebec writers, tends to use the term "anglais" to cover both cases.
26. "[Les French Canadians étaient] des porcs indociles, indisciplinés et fous." *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, p. 91.
27. "Dans mon lit qu'est-ce que mon Joseph fera avec son moignon?" *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, p. 30.
28. "Un homme qui n'a pas le courage d'aller faire la guerre pour protéger son pays, c'est pas un homme." *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, p. 33.
29. "Elle parle quelle langue, la voix du capitalisme? . . . It speaks English." *Le deux-millième étage*, p. 86.
30. "Si on ne sait pas l'anglais on ne peut même pas aller pisser quand on veut." *Il est par là, le soleil*, p. 132.
31. "Nous savons vivre." *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, p. 94.
32. "Moi, je vis." *Le deux-millième étage*, p. 16.
33. ". . . les forces merveilleuses de la terre." *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, p. 56.
34. "Ce n'est pas mon garçon qui est dans le cercueil, mais je me demande: s'il y a un bon Dieu, pourquoi s'acharne-t-il à envoyer des enfants dans ces boîtes?" *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, p. 59.
35. "'C'est une sainte!' . . . 'Fermons vite cette fenêtre.'" *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, p. 75.
36. "Maintenant tu es un homme. Tu sais parler comme un homme." *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, p. 119.
37. "Dans sa bouche elle était fraîche, elle était bonne." *Floralie, où es-tu?*, p. 66.
38. "Bon Dieu, je te dis que t'es pas juste . . . Si tu penses que je mens, descends me trouver: nous allons régler cette affaire comme des hommes." *Floralie, où es-tu?*, p. 122.
39. "J'ai compris, j'ai lu dans ton jeu: tu as peur d'un homme qui a pas peur de toi." *Floralie, où es-tu?*, p. 122.

40. “. . . ses pieds se posaient sans hésitation et solidement.” *Floralie, où es-tu?*, p. 150.
41. “Un jour je me suis aperçu qu’il y avait pas plus de bon Dieu dans le ciel que de serpent à sonnette électrique au Québec.” *Il est par là, le soleil*, p. 115.
42. “Dieu existe pas, mais moi, j’existe!” *Il est par là, le soleil*, p. 116.
43. “Si un homme dort bien, mange bien et si ses intestins ont envie de se vider au moins une fois par jour, moi, je proclame que c’est un homme heureux.” *Le deux-millième étage*, p. 84.
44. “Moi, j’aime la terre. J’ai été fait avec de la terre puis quand j’avais me défaire, j’avais redevenir de la terre.” *Le deux-millième étage*, p. 59.
45. “Vouloir faire l’amour, c’est un signe de vie: les morts ont pas ce genre d’envie-là.” *Le deux-millième étage*, p. 62.
46. “Nous, on profite de la vie avant qu’elle nous rende trop triste.” *Le deux-millième étage*, p. 38.
47. “C’est la mort qu’ils poignardèrent violemment.” *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, p. 70.
48. “Nous ne sommes pas de la race de ceux qui abandonnent.” *Le Jardin des délices*, p. 143.
49. “Ça peut se dire tranquillement en fumant, mais ça ne se fait pas.” *Le Jardin des délices*, p. 166.
50. “Nous sommes venus il y a trois cents ans et nous sommes restés . . . Nous avons marqué un plan du continent nouveau, de Gaspé à Montréal, de Saint-Jean d’Iberville à l’Ungava, en disant: ici toutes les choses que nous avons apportées avec nous, notre culte, notre langue, nos vertus et jusqu’à nos faiblesses deviennent des choses sacrées, intangibles et qui devront demeurer jusqu’à la fin.” *Il n’y a pas de pays sans grand-père*, p. 97.
51. “Le long des chemins que j’avais parcourus depuis le village de mon enfance, j’avais oublié quelque part la science de mon père.” *Les Enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*, p. 162.
52. “Quand le monde se fait p’us d’enfants, c’est que le monde a p’us envie de vivre.” *Il n’y a pas de pays sans grand-père*, pp. 7–8.
53. “Bientôt les gens, au lieu de fabriquer leur propre crotte, vont préférer aller l’acheter dans des sachets de plastique.” *Il n’y a pas de pays sans grand-père*, p. 27.
54. “Jean-Thomas a besoin de la mémoire des hommes anciens. Dans la bouche de Jean-Thomas, la mémoire des hommes anciens devient le rêve des hommes jeunes. Sa voix unit le passé des vieux livres au passé de Vieux-Thomas; Jean-Thomas promet avec ce passé de faire l’avenir.” *Il n’y a pas de pays sans grand-père*, p. 98.
55. “Vieux-Thomas racontera et, comme d’habitude, à mesure qu’il parlera, il recommencera à vivre comme si, de dire les mots de sa vie ramenait la jeunesse.” *Il n’y a pas de pays sans grand-père*, p. 96.
56. “Au milieu de l’hiver, les paroles entretiennent la chaleur de la vie. Le souffle des paroles essaie de chasser le souffle des vents.” *Le Jardin des délices*, p. 101.

57. "Aussi longtemps qu'il s'entendra parler, il ne sera pas mort. Les paroles ne sont pas la vraie réalité: penser à une truite, ce n'est pas la tenir glissante et frémissante dans sa main, mais les paroles font une magie qui ressuscite les choses mortes et fait vivre ce qui n'est pas encore vivant. Les paroles donnent la vie." *Il n'y a pas de pays sans grand-père*, p. 23.
58. "Mes frères québécois ne voyez pas là un retour en arrière ou une déroboade devant le présent, soupçonnez plutôt une volonté d'aller vers l'avenir." Roch Carrier, "Comment suis-je devenu romancier?" p. 271.
59. "Ecrivant mon roman . . . je prends place parmi un Québec qui a été dépossédé de sa culture et qui, petit à petit, avec acharnement s'applique à se donner une âme." Roch Carrier, "Comment suis-je devenu romancier?" p. 272.
60. "Ecrire c'est consentir à jouer le grand jeu de la vie, de l'amour et de la mort où l'âme est condamnée à perdre à la fin de la partie, et le romancier est celui qui n'accepte pas tout à fait ce rôle." Roch Carrier, "Comment suis-je devenu romancier?" pp. 266-67.