

READING CARRIER'S "THE NUN WHO RETURNED TO IRELAND"

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ROCH CARRIER'S "The Nun Who Returned to Ireland" ("La Religieuse qui retourna en Irlande") concerns a young French boy learning to read with an English accent. His school learning, signified by his newly-acquired English accent, is opposed to his absorbed knowledge, the speech he shares with his family and friends, and it is these conflicting codes of knowledge that initiate and sustain the discourse of the text. As Jonathan Culler observes, "it is the nature of codes to be always already in existence, to have lost origins."¹ The codes we have absorbed are never recognized *as codes* until we have allowed them to be supplanted by others, until we have been required to unlearn them. It is the fate of the teacher in this story to demand the very process of unlearning, of cultural dissimulation which she herself has undergone in order to become a teacher. And it is the fate of the boy to repeat as an adult the painful awakening he has prompted in his teacher.

The text offers an enigma in its opening lines:

After my first day of school I ran back to the house, holding out my reader.
'Mama, I learned how to read!' I announced.²

We know that boys who have just learned to read are incapable of writing about it, and we therefore infer an older narrator, setting up a familiar antithesis: innocent I/experienced I, the doubling of narrative voice well-known to Canadian readers in the short stories of Clark Blaise, Margaret Laurence, and Alice Munro. And this doubled voice also announces a corresponding theme (innocence/experience) developed through an action or series of actions in which the young narrator takes part. That these actions constitute rites of passage in the life of the narrator is one of the expectations aroused in the mind of the reader by his identification of the generic tradition to which the story belongs. In the course of our analysis, we shall see whether the text does indeed fulfil these expectations.

That this is an important day to both the child and his parents is only mildly undercut by the father's little joke — “ ‘Pretty soon, son, you'll be able to do like me — read the newspaper upside down in your sleep!’ ” The image of the father snoring on the couch with a newspaper over his face does not suggest a social milieu in which reading is in itself a particularly valued activity. Furthermore, the rendering of the father's speech, his *parole*, reinforces our view of him as an unsophisticated, uneducated man (“ ‘Betôt, mon garçon, tu vas pouvoir faire comme moé, lire le journal à l'envers en dormant!’ ”).

Ignoring the jests of his father, the boy demands to be heard :

And I read the sentence I'd learned in school that day, from Sister Brigitte. But instead of picking me up and lifting me in his arms, my father looked at my mother and my mother didn't come and kiss her little boy who'd learned to read so quickly.

Wherever the antithesis of young narrator/old narrator, innocence/experience, naiveté/sophistication is manifested, we may expect the presence of irony. Irony presupposes conflicting interpretations and thus conflicting codes for, as Robert Scholes points out, “irony, of all figures, is the one that must always take us out of the text and into codes, contexts, and situations.”³ When the narrator employs the phrase “her little boy who'd learned to read so quickly,” referring to himself in the third person, we apprehend directly what we had already inferred from the opening sentence: that is, the separation of actor and narrator, of the boy he was and the adult he has become, and as the “little boy who'd learned to read so quickly,” he is mocked by his adult self. The excitement of learning is undermined, for what the boy has learned is perceived by his parents as error. Worse, what he has learned has involved the unlearning of his cultural code, the learning that is osmotic, absorbed from his milieu. His newly-acquired accent is identifiably alien :

‘You're reading with an English accent!’ my mother exclaimed.

‘I'm reading the way Sister Brigitte taught me.’

‘Don't tell me he's learning his own mother tongue in English,’ my father protested.

The learning process that the reader has expected from his identification of the generic tradition of the story is thus ironically inverted. To paraphrase the father, the boy has learned to read French in English, and this learning can only divide him from his parents, his friends, and his village. Nevertheless, there is something comically extreme in the father's choice of words (“ ‘Dis-moé pas qu'i' va apprendre sa langue maternelle en anglais’ ”) that undercuts the seriousness of the situation, just as his previous remark about reading the newspaper upside down in his sleep served to undermine the importance of learning to read in his culture.

The boy has his own explanation of his teacher's strange accent :

I had noticed that Sister Brigitte didn't speak the way we did, but that was quite natural because we all knew that nuns don't do anything the way other people do. . . .

The phrase "we all knew" ("nous le savions") implies its opposite. What we all know (certainly what children know) about any particular group of people is usually a stereotype or a myth, never more than partially true. Though nuns may not dress like everybody else, may not get married nor have children, and may live in seclusion ("toujours cachées"), no other differences need apply. The ironic humour of the boy's assertion only reinforces his naiveté, and we feel behind this admission the less than covert manipulation of the adult narrator indulging himself in self-mockery. And as the ironic statements of the father revealed his cultural code, here the boy's statement links him to his father in its disclosure of a shared code.

After all, the boy has ample reason not to feel guilty about his adoption of an English accent :

But as far as knowing whether Sister Brigitte had an English accent, how could I? I'd never heard a single word of English.

The boy's failure to recognize English is an indicator of the isolation of the family from the cosmopolitan world, an isolation emphasized in the paragraph that follows :

Over the next few days I learned that she hadn't been born in our village; it seemed very strange that someone could live in the village without being born there, because everyone else in the village had been born in the village.

To be a villager then is to be born one and to remain one. The nun will always be an outsider because she was born elsewhere. The importance of birthplace as a qualification for citizenship, for belonging to the community, is confirmed with the mention of Monsieur Cassidy, the undertaker, who is Irish like Sister Brigitte but who has been born in the village and is therefore accepted by the community. The "whispers" ("chuchotements") of the parents on the subject of Sister Brigitte suggest all those unpleasant connotations of the small, isolated, inward-looking community: narrow-mindedness, prejudice, distrust of strangers. This is the dark side of the cultural isolation or deprivation we have identified with the father. It is appropriate then that the boy, desiring knowledge, should turn to the more sympathetic mother :

'Where's Ireland?' I asked my mother.

'It's a very small, very green little country in the ocean, far, far away.'

In other words, Ireland is very like the community of which she herself is a member: small and isolated, with the implication that distance reinforces aliena-

tion and difference. To be Irish then is strangely to be something like French-Canadian, though the difference between the two is as great as the distance that separates their two worlds, the difference of language.

WHY DOES THE BOY WISH TO LEARN from Sister Brigitte, since to learn from her is to forget his own osmotic knowledge? "I was so impatient to read the books my uncles brought back from their far-off colleges." Not surprisingly, the boy equates the strangeness of his teacher's accent with the exotic splendour of his uncles' books, brought from far-away places. The "far-off colleges" ("des collèges lointains") signify not only knowledge but also sophistication, and yet apparently nothing is lost in the gaining of such knowledge for it is not necessary for the boy to go away, to leave the safety of home. It is enough that the family has been represented in strange places by the uncles, who have safely confined the threat of alien sophistication to the printed page. But we know already that something *is* lost, that the learning of the alien code involves the unlearning of the native one. And the lessening of the native influence is seen in a corresponding lessening of the authority of the home. The boy turns to his teacher with the same question he has posed to his mother:

'Sister Brigitte, where's Ireland?'

Why was the mother's answer unsatisfactory? Did the boy suspect that her answer was wrong or merely in need of supplementation? The repetition of the question forces us to compare the two responses. Here is the nun's:

'Ireland is the country where my parents were born, and my grandparents and my great-grandparents. And I was born in Ireland too. I was a little girl in Ireland. When I was a child like you I lived in Ireland. We had horses and sheep.'

Is this speech to be representative of the exotic alien sophistication that the boy desires? In style it is childlike, tautological, more primitive than sophisticated in its incantatory repetition. In this initial speech of the nun we are suddenly brought home to the truth of the mother's answer and our identification of village with Ireland. In a sense, the mother, though she has failed to satisfy the boy's curiosity, has given a truer answer than the Irish woman has, for the nun does not attempt to describe *where* Ireland is, but rather *what* it is to *her*. Her mentality is not cosmopolitan at all, and in its unworldliness suggests kinship with the villagers who are so suspicious of her.

When the teacher goes on to say that "the Lord asked me to become his servant," the boy is especially puzzled:

‘What does that mean?’

‘The Lord asked me if I wanted to become a nun. I said yes. So then I left my family and I forgot Ireland and my village.’

‘Forgot your village?’

I could see in her eyes that she didn’t want to answer my question.

In the cultural code that we have identified with the boy and his milieu, it is clear that the sense of belonging to the place one is born in is the key to identity. It is equally clear that the nun herself has at one time adhered to this same code. But she has transgressed this code to follow another. In order to learn Christian obedience and self-denial she has had to unlearn the same fidelity to home, culture, language, family, and place that characterizes the village she lives in. She is doubly exiled then, having voluntarily abandoned one community never to be accepted by the other. “ ‘Forgot your village?’ ” It is not necessary to add “ ‘How could you?’ ” The nun avoids this question as she avoided the question about Ireland because she knows that a reaffirmation of her loyalty to Ireland would be a denial of her Christian faith. How can these separate codes be reconciled?

The irony of the nun’s situation is that in doing her duty to God she must not only reject her own personal ties to home and family but must also force her pupils to do the same. And the irony is deepened by the fact that it is her own pupil who reminds her of this.

The boy relentlessly pursues his inquiry:

Sister Brigitte’s face, surrounded by her starched coif, had no age; I learned that she was old, very old, because she had been a teacher to grandparents.

‘Have you ever gone back to Ireland?’

‘God didn’t want to send me back.’

‘You must miss your country.’

‘God asked me to teach little children to read and write so every child could read the great book of life.’

The nun’s attempts to deflect the boy’s questions have the quality of responses learned by rote. Our expectations of the fulfillment of the innocence/experience genre are increasingly frustrated by the nun’s failure to assume the teaching role we have assigned to her. Now we see the nun playing the role in which we have previously cast the young narrator — the innocent and unquestioning student — a role that the boy has already begun to abandon in his quest for the source and meaning of Ireland.

His knowledge of the nun’s age leads the boy to his final question:

‘Sister Brigitte, you’re older than our grandparents! Will you go back to Ireland before you die?’

The old nun must have known from my expression that death was so remote for me I could speak of it quite innocently, as I would speak of the grass or the sky. She said simply:

'Let's go on with our reading. School children in Ireland aren't as disorderly as you.'

The title of the story anticipates the boy's question. The title lies behind and beyond the conflicting codes, promising a resolution that the nun's answer would seem merely to temporarily postpone: "'Let's go on with our reading.'" But re-reading the story with the ending in mind we can see a far more sinister implication in this indirect reply. We can also see the planting of the seed that will produce a possible resolution of the enigma posed by the boy, the unanswered question: "'Where's Ireland?'"

In the narrator's comment on death we hear the voice of his mature self, the self that is now conscious of its mortality, and therefore able to reflect ironically on his youthful naiveté. But the nun's response is also interpreted for us by the mature narrator's choice of words: "The old nun *must have known* from my expression that death was so remote for me . . ." ("La vieille religieuse *dut comprendre* dans mon regard que la mort était pour moi si lointaine . . ."). From his experienced point of view he allows us to understand what he himself never realized at the time — that Sister Brigitte knows her death is imminent. As Ireland is "loin, loin" for the mother, and the colleges attended by the uncles are "lointains," so for the boy death is "lointaine." But for the nun, whom we know is old — some of her former pupils are now grandparents — death cannot be far away. And though she has made a conscious choice to leave her home, she has not succeeded in forgetting it; she has merely allowed her religious code to suppress her cultural code.

It is this suppressed code that re-emerges with a vengeance as her end approaches:

All that autumn we applied ourselves to our reading; by December we could read the brief texts Sister Brigitte wrote on the blackboard herself, in a pious script we tried awkwardly to imitate; in every text the word Ireland always appeared. It was by writing the word Ireland that I learned to form a capital I.

Imitation is again the basis of the learning process, but what is being imitated now is not merely an aberration in form (the wrong accent) but a distortion of content (Ireland as subject).⁴ The "pious script" ("une calligraphie pieuse") that the class attempts to imitate might properly be associated with the nun's position as a religious teacher, but we should not ignore the suggested cross-linkage of piety with or towards Irishness. Since the conflicting demands of the nun's life are already manifested in the idea of teaching Irishness — an almost oxymoronic concept involving the juxtaposition of Christian duty and that which Christian duty has supplanted — it is not surprising to find that the formal aspect of the nun's behaviour (her piety) can be transferred from one code to the other. But in paying heed to both competing codes at the same time, the nun is

threatened with the loss of the clear Christian path of her life. For the boy, to gain the skills of reading and writing involves a loss of cultural memory; for the nun, a corresponding regaining of cultural memory involves a loss of conscious memory. The boy, however, has a simpler explanation:

From our parents' whispers we learned that Sister Brigitte had lost her memory. We weren't surprised. We knew that old people always lose their memories and Sister Brigitte was an old person because she had been a teacher to grandparents.

The same kind of clichéd assertion made about Sister Brigitte as *nun* is here applied to her as *old person*: the boy's osmotic learning always leads to *a priori* reasoning. There can be no other explanation than age for the loss of memory. That this is possibly true in no way subtracts from the ironic implications of the statement. All unquestioned assertions of the innocent narrator are subject to ironic exposure. In this, at least, the text fulfills the expectations it arouses.

The story ends with the apparent death of Sister Brigitte, a death which is also, in some ways, a "homecoming":

Late in January, the nuns in the convent discovered that Sister Brigitte had left her room. They looked everywhere for her, in all the rooms and all the classrooms. Outside, a storm was blowing gusts of snow and wind; you couldn't see Heaven or earth, as they said. Sister Brigitte, who had spent the last few weeks in her bed, had fled into the storm. Some men from the village spotted her black form in the blizzard: beneath her vast mantle she was barefoot. When the men asked her where she was going, Sister Brigitte replied in English that she was going home, to Ireland.

The storm is a symbol of the confusion in the nun's mind. The narrator's colloquialism ("comme l'on disait, on ne voyait ni ciel ni terre") is, like the other ideas and sayings prompted by his cultural code, a true remark couched in a hyperbolic platitude: Sister Brigitte, at least, cannot see Heaven or earth because she knows not whether to heed the code of Heaven or the code of earth or home. In seeking home, she is destroyed by an act of God, perhaps a suitable punishment for having fled the convent. Her "black form" seen against the white blizzard ("la poudrerie") is an appropriate symbolic antithesis, but less suggestive than the contrast of her bare feet with her "vast mantle." To go barefoot in the snow has traditional religious connotations of self-denial, even masochistically saint-like humility, but bare feet and black clothing are also signs of the corpse prepared for burial, the body on its last earthly journey, the journey that immediately precedes the soul's homecoming.

DOES THE NUN RETURN to Ireland? The title implies that she did ("retourna" — past definite); the last sentence suggests only that she was making the attempt ("elle s'en retournait chez elle, en Irlande.") Common sense

dictates that she could never have made it, being old, sick, and barefoot in the storm.

Now one of the goals of any interpretation is the resolution of whatever enigmas are posed by the hermeneutic code of the text. In fact, we expect the text itself to provide answers to the questions it raises. But this text has not always justified the expectations we have had of it. We expected the boy to *learn* something, for why else would the mature narrator have told the story? What has he learnt? We expected the nun to return to Ireland, for the title informed us that she did. Has she returned to Ireland? We might also have expected an answer to the reiterated question, "Where's Ireland?"

Let us examine some possible answers to these interlocking questions. Ireland is a sign both of foreignness and of home, just as the village is. Therefore to ask "Where's Ireland?" is to ask "Where's home?" or "Where is the source of your identity?" But our exploration of the code of home has revealed a web of connotations: home is language, family, superstition, custom, all part of the cultural code absorbed from birth. This code can be suppressed — indeed, all knowledge acquired in school suppresses it — but it can never be destroyed. In the story, the initial action that raises the question of difference is the conflict of English and French pronunciation. The nun has suppressed her language, but she has not been able to assimilate the correct pronunciation of her adopted tongue. Therefore, when she abandons the imposed code of Christian duty to start on her journey home, she begins, once again, to speak in English, her native tongue. This is the triumph of osmotic knowledge over rote learning. In a sense, to speak English is already to be back in Ireland, to be home, and therefore the tense of the verb in the title is finally justifiable.⁵ But is this what the narrator learns? That we carry our home with us wherever we go, embodied in the cultural code we have assimilated from birth? Or is it a darker truth that he learns: "You can't go home again"?

To accept one conclusion — that the nun "goes home" in spirit — is also to acknowledge its corollary — that she does not go home in body. Indeed, one might go further and suggest that only by dying can she "go home": the gain is offset by the greatest loss of all. Another factor intrudes at this point: the nun has sacrificed her calling, has abnegated her sworn duty, to make her journey home. Of what use is it to gain the world and lose one's soul in the process? There are no clear choices, no gains without losses. Is this the lesson the narrator has learned? Is this the theme of the story?

Before answering these questions, we might consider another story from the same collection that throws some light on the present text. In *The Hockey Sweater and Other Stories*, the voice is consistently that of the doubled narrator, simultaneously child and adult, except in the last story, "A Secret Lost in the Water," in which an event of the recent past (when the narrator is an adult)

is compared to an event of the distant past (when he was a boy). It is in this story that the narrator is most closely identified with Carrier himself:

Years passed; I went to other schools, saw other countries, I had children, I wrote some books and my poor father is lying in the earth where so many times he had found fresh water.

One day someone began to make a film about my village and its inhabitants, from whom I've stolen so many of the stories that I tell.

This statement admits the autobiographical while simultaneously denying it, saying in effect, yes, this is the village where I was born, the father described was my father, and the little boy was me, but the stories were not stories about me — they have been appropriated from others and are not to be taken as a record of my life. This story, however, for all its difference from the other stories in the collection, is also the summation of the other narratives, the thread that weaves the disparate pieces of cloth into a recognizable whole. In “A Secret Lost in the Water,” we are told that, as a boy, the narrator could, like his father, find water by divination. But, as an adult, he has lost the power to do so. Here is the way the story, and the collection, ends:

The alder stayed motionless in my hands and the water beneath the earth refused to sing.

Somewhere along the roads I'd taken since the village of my childhood I had forgotten my father's knowledge.

'Don't feel sorry,' said the man, thinking no doubt of his farm and his childhood; 'nowadays fathers can't pass on anything to the next generation.'

And he took the alder branch from my hands.

The emphasis in the text is on loss, not gain: maturity, education, sophistication are poor replacements for magic and belief. The old man cannot hand anything down to the young; the alder branch is withheld. But even as the text mourns this loss, it also celebrates the worth of what has been lost, in effect immortalizing it. This is the paradigm that we have learned to recognize in the immortalizing convention of the Elizabethan love sonnet, and this is the paradox that informs all stories of innocence and experience, not least the story with which we began. What does the story of innocence and experience suggest? That to gain experience (which is valuable because it is learning) is to lose innocence (which is valuable because it is uncorrupted). But as long as the story can be told, and told in the doubled narrative voice, that innocence is never lost, that experience is not yet gained. To go home to innocence is to abandon adulthood, but wanting to go home is in itself an assertion of adulthood, of experience, since no innocent ever wants to remain in that state. This is the double bind of the doubled narrator, whose story denies what his narration of it would affirm — that his present self co-exists with the child he was. The value of innocence is never perceived until it is gone, is never present until it is absent. The code goes unrecog-

nized until it has been replaced by another. The real value of experience, the replacement code, the gain, the discovery of selfhood, is to remind us of what has been suppressed, lost, undiscovered. But such contrary states of the human psyche cannot co-exist. Thus the paradox of the nun who returned to Ireland can now be reformulated: for her to return home, to innocence, and to unlearn the learned, is to be what she is not, to cease to be. This is the real meaning of "you can't go home again."

We can now see the significance of the author's formulation of his theme in the context of reading. Self-awareness is a recognition not only of one's difference from others but also of one's difference from the self/selves one has abandoned. For the narrator of "The Nun Who Returned to Ireland," this self-awareness begins with reading. For the reader of the story, awareness begins in the same way. It is in this sense that the story is "already read," for we cannot read it without becoming aware that it is our story too.⁸

NOTES

- ¹ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), p. 103.
- ² Roch Carrier, *The Hockey Sweater and Other Stories*, trans. Sheila Fischman (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1979), p. 9. All English quotations from Carrier's work are from this edition. The French quotations are from *Les Enfants du bon-homme dans la lune* (Montréal: Editions internationales Alain Stanké, 1979).
- ³ Robert Scholes, *Semiotics and Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 76-77.
- ⁴ It could be argued that the form of the word "Ireland" (or "Irlande") is itself a sign of its difference. "C'est en traçant le mot Irlande que j'ai appris à tracer le I majuscule." What possible words could "Irlande" replace in the boy's potential written vocabulary? "Il" for one and "île" for another — both suggestive of the very connotations embedded in the idea of Ireland: otherness and isolation, the not-I and the not-here, the unknowable and the unreachable.
- ⁵ I have not commented on the English-French antithesis in its political dimension, though this is surely an important consideration for any Québécois writer. But Carrier's exposition of the colonial theme is never simplistic. We might at least keep in mind the fact that the English-speaking nun comes from Ireland, another conquered nation whose language, more than Québec's, is not its own. It may be that the author is subtly aware that the nun's situation is even more ironic, and more tragic, than we have supposed, for she teaches a language not her own in an accent not her own. Perhaps as an Irish woman she is exiled from her own culture even when she is at home.
- ⁶ I am grateful to Robert Lecker and Stephen Bonnycastle for their helpful suggestions on an earlier version of this paper.