

SPORTIVE GROTESQUE

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I
N THE MIDDLE OF *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*¹ the young nun Esmalda returns to her home in the village to pay homage to her dead brother, the soldier Corriveau. Obeying her religious order's strictures against entering the house, she views the mourners around the coffin through an opened window and asks: "Qui est mort? Qui est vivant? Le mort peut être vivant. Le vivant peut être mort." Despite the unthinking, almost mechanical quality of her speaking, the question is important, underlining the complex and problematic issue of death in the novel. In *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* the coffin sits in the centre of the house as it remains in the centre of the characters' consciousness, and it is the symbolic focus of the story's meaning.

Roch Carrier has referred to his writing as "a funny adventure", and we can readily see the humour in his first novel.² Varieties of humour can be found in almost every section, from the farcical fairness of Amelie's every-other-night policy with her two husbands, to the sexual jokes unconsciously contained in the prayers of the villagers, to the satirical bite in the depiction of Bérubé's first sexual encounter and in the priest's eulogy. Using John Ruskin's terminology, it can be said that the novel moves away from the terrible towards the sportive grotesque. In other words, in Carrier's grotesqueness play or jest is more dominant than, for example, in Marie-Claire Blais' grotesque writing.

However it is also clear that fearfulness is always present in the playing and that Carrier's mockery carries with it an almost constant undercurrent of horror. The bizarre and amusing actions of the characters have much in common with the type of black comedy found in *Le Chercheur de trésors*, a novel by Philippe Aubert de Gaspé (*filz*) which Carrier admits he was much influenced by and whose motifs he obviously borrowed from. Moreover, as in so many other gothic and grotesque works, in *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* images of death are a primary source of the fearful or horrifying aspect.

The sense of death on a personal, physical level is of primary concern to the characters, a reality brought home to them by the returned body of one of their

own villagers. He is treated as a hero, although we learn that he has been ungloriously killed in action while relieving himself behind a hedge in the army camp. Mother Corriveau questions the purpose of a life which leads inevitably to the grave:

A quoi servait-il d'avoir été un enfant aux yeux bleus, d'avoir appris la vie, ses noms, ses couleurs, ses lois, péniblement comme si cela avait été contre nature? A quoi servait-il d'avoir été un enfant si malheureux de vivre . . .

Tout était aussi inutile que les larmes.

Where Mother Corriveau weeps in response to death, her husband Anthyme rages; where she attempts prayer he can only swear.

The menacing fact of individual physical death is a metaphor for other kinds of death and dying which spread in widening circles of implication through the story. The unconscious blasphemies of the mourners' prayers emphasize the spiritually moribund condition of a people for whom their religious teaching is ironically itself a kind of death force. The priest tells his parishioners that life is unimportant except as a prelude to death and final judgment, "que nous vivons pour mourir et que nous mourons pour vivre." His Jansenist sermon portrays a vengeful God, and warns of the torments of Hell awaiting mankind with its "nature pecheresse et voluptueuse" and especially awaiting those people who stray from the prescribed devotions. The narrow emptiness of his message is a bitter satire upon the whole Church, with its glorification of war and admonition to overburdened women to produce more children — the latter a grotesque and deadening distortion of the life force. The nun mouths the platitude, "Qu'il est doux de revenir parmi les siens!", while remaining apart in the cold outdoors. The decayed teeth in her wan thin face suggest that submission to the Church's dictates results in a withering of humanity.³

The characters in *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* also face a cultural death in which their sense of identity as individuals and as a community is being increasingly repressed. The villagers are powerless against the authority and force of the English-speaking soldiers, and in the end are thrown out of their own house by these strangers. The uncomprehending sergeant disdainfully views the "pigs" who do not even speak a civilized language, and whose behaviour throughout the night is proof of the truth of his old history lesson on French-Canadian animality. Bérubé, who attempts to bridge both French and English cultures, is caught in the middle. At the conclusion he faces the prospect of his dismal future; considered by both sides to be a traitor, he is condemned to be a perpetual outsider. Thus the novel repeats the pattern of fear found in John Richardson's *Wacousta* and Jules-Paul Tardivel's *Pour la patrie* in which the notion of cultural annihilation is a primary anxiety; it reinforces the idea that collective social menace as much as individual menace is a recurring motif in Canadian gothic fiction. Yet there is a difference

between Tardivel's nineteenth century, French-Canadian version and Carrier's contemporary novel. In *Pour la patrie*, the enemy is clearly defined as the non-Catholic, notably the Freemason and English-Canadian Protestant, while the French-Canadian ideological fortress of religion and *patrie* is still intact. In *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, by contrast, the garrison has all but fallen, having been undermined from within as well as from without.

The enemy is also more nebulous, wearing many faces besides that of the *maudit anglais*. Despite the dominance of the soldiers and the subsequent resentment of them by the villagers, the awareness of menacing cultural annihilation is more than the threat of English masters overriding French-Canadian victims. Margaret Atwood takes too limited a view of the menace in her analysis of *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*,⁴ when she emphasizes the two opposing cultures. The threat is also a matter of modern technological society stamping out indigenous cultural mores and desires, of massive, impersonal forces acting against the villagers' feebler human particularities and peculiarities. As the railway station employee observes, "c'est la guerre des gros contre les petits. Corriveau est mort. Les petits meurent. Les gros sont éternels."

There is a gradually surfacing fear that even the big guys are on a path to destruction, that humanity as a whole will march to a mechanical doom. In Henri's nightmare, Corriveau's coffin enlarges and all the people in the world march into it "comme à l'église, combés, soumis". Significantly the last to disappear are the armies of soldiers, "à la discipline mécanique" like the group around Corriveau's bier. The latter stand like automatons, rigid and impassive, and even the girls noticed "il n'était pas humain qu'ils restent ainsi tante la nuit figés, raides, immobiles." Thus there is a warning that technological society with its will to power will not only turn man into a desensitized, impersonal robot, but will eventually draw him ordered and submissive to his doom. The train, roaring through the snowy wastes into the little village with its mechanized soldiers, is a technological engine of death not unlike the train which intrudes into the woods in Faulkner's "The Bear".

The horror of technological society, with its reduction of the spontaneously human to the automatic, is one more version of the gothic-grotesque motif of mechanism, found in Canadian gothic fiction as far back as *Wacousta*. Carrier's soldiers, who seem to function without feeling and to move without motive other than obedience to orders or the fulfilment of a mindless drill, represent the ultimate in dehumanization. In this as in other modern grotesque works, the technological automation suggests something demonic beyond the logical implications of a powerful system. It invokes fear of a world which is actively menacing as well as incomprehensible. In Henri's nightmare, the soldiers are like mechanical toys drawn by a central control in a little box, which marches them back into its depths and shuts the lid on them.

DESPITE THE IMPORTANCE of death as a symbolic focus, Carrier's novel is not simply a tale about death, but, as Nancy Bailey points out, it presents a battle between life and death⁵ in which the two forces are often surprisingly confused. This confusion and the resulting sense of both death-in-life and life-in-death is a key to much of the grotesqueness in the book. The nun's question reveals her uncertainty as to who is really alive, despite the Church's teaching that life after death is the only valid life. Henri senses that life on earth has become a living death, that "l'homme est malheureux partout," but like the other villagers, he fears the truth of an afterlife in which the flames of Hell and purgatory torment all sinners.

Despite the forces of death which threaten to squash their humanity, the villagers have an irrepressible desire for life:

Les villageois vivaient, ils priaient pour se rappeler, pour se souvenir qu'ils n'étaient pas avec Corriveau, que leur vie n'était pas terminée et, tout en croyant prier pour le salut de Corriveau, c'est leur joie de vivre qu'ils proclamaient en de tristes prières.

Corriveau underlines their life-in-death desire when he complains that "s'il fallait passer devant des cerceueils et s'arrêter à un cercueil, il n'était pas juste qu'on eut en soi l'amour si évident de vie."

Many of the activities of the villagers are a mixture of life and death forces. Although the eating and drinking bouts lead to a brawling, destructive conclusion, they are in themselves a defiant display of sensuousness. Mother Corriveau's cooking becomes an almost savage attack on death in which she sweatily beats at the pie dough, sensing that the perfume of the golden baked tortiere is the essence of living; she explains that "quand on a un mort dans la maison, il ne faut pas que la maison sente la mort." In this role she becomes a kind of earth mother, a characterization which Carrier explores more fully in the second novel of the trilogy, *Floralie, où es tu?*

Sex is both an instrument of death and of life. On the one hand, the Germans are described as killing women by raping them and, to the sleeping Molly, the attacks of her loveless husband cause dreams of a knife tearing her stomach open. On the other hand Molly, a prostitute, represents the happiness of living to all the young soldiers who used to come to her. For Bérubé, the initial thought of sex outside a Church-blessed marriage leads to visions of damnation; yet with Molly in bed with him as his wife, "c'est la mort qu'ils poignardèrent violemment."

The pervasive violence also represents a confusion of life and death forces. In the story we find father beating up son, husband against wife, neighbour against neighbour, English against French, and the omnipresent spectre of the world war

itself. The war beyond the village acts only as a catalyst for the war within. The violence is an expression of the villagers' intellectual and spiritual isolation from each other, of the decline of commonly held cultural values and the resultant profound ignorance and misunderstanding of each other. The violence is destructive, but it is also a positive response to repression. It is a sign "of vitality badly used,"⁶ of upsurge of life in a society where there is no common language of meaning but body language.

The recurring images of blood and snow suggest the dual implications of violence. At various points in the book, blood spills on the winter snow, whether it is the blood of the amputated hand or the beaten-up faces of the villagers in their battles with each other and with the soldiers. Snow is a traditional image of purity and innocence. In French-Canadian literature it is also an image of isolation and the inward looking naivety or sterility it produces. Maria Chapdelaine comes to mind as do the words of the familiar song by Gilles Vignault: "Mon pays, ce n'est pas un pays, c'est l'hiver." The French-Canadian garrison is built of snow and ice as much as it is reinforced by religious and nationalist principles. The bloody brawls are obviously disfiguring, cruel and destructive. At the same time the blood that spills on the snow as well as on Molly's virginal, white wedding dress may suggest a human sensuous response which overrides traditional "bloodless" ideals. Carrier's concluding statement in the novel — "La guerre avait sali la neige" — has ironic rather than tragic overtones.

Whether violent or not, many of the activities and actions in the story relate to a selfhood not fully realized, to a society where it is increasingly difficult to feel at home. At the beginning of the book Arthur tries to persuade Henri to accept the war and his soldier's role as a defence of traditional social values: "Les soldats ont comme devoir de protéger les fermiers pères de famille, les enfants, le bétail, la patrie." Yet increasingly Henri realizes his true position: "Sa femme n'était plus la sienne, sa maison n'était plus la sienne, ni ses animaux, ni ses enfants." The characters' bizarre actions reflect their estrangement, their inarticulated anxieties about an alienated life.

Sherwood Anderson has related the quality of grotesqueness in people to a single-minded pursuit of partial truths.⁷ Ronald Sutherland has also suggested that Carrier's characters are grotesques because they cling to outworn truths.⁸ Thus Mother Corriveau's desperate observance of religious practices becomes grotesque in its distortion, and Bérubé's reflex-like response to the values implicit in the soldiers' way of life makes a grotesque out of him, as when we see his frenzied and inhuman attempt to make a good soldier of Arsène. At the same time the characters may reflect D. W. Robertson's definition that the grotesque "is a monster because of unresolved conflicts in his makeup."⁹ Sometimes "the grotesque pretends to be one thing but is actually something else,"¹⁰ as is the case with Esmalda in particular. The unresolved conflicts often have to do with

spiritual values or social attitudes which the character has ostensibly accepted, and another reality which he actually practises. The source of humour as well as of fearful meaninglessness or absurdity partially comes from their divided response.

In a more formal way, the grotesque quality of Carrier's writing relates to a constant juxtaposition of extreme incongruities. Repeatedly he combines the extreme poles of the sacred and profane in Quebec life, a characteristic similar to that found in the late gothic phase of medieval art, and which Charles Muscatine associates with a loss of purposeful direction in the culture:

Its religion is incongruously stretched between new ecstasies of mysticism and a profane, almost tactile familiarity with sacred matters. Its sense of fact is often spiritless or actually morbid. For all its boisterous play, the age is profoundly pessimistic; it is preoccupied with irretrievable passage of time, with disorder, sickness, decay and death.¹¹

In *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* we find the twin "spiritual" values of patriotism and religion are incongruously yoked with the mundane practicalities of everyday living; the flag is a table cloth; the image of Christ on the cross merges with that of a stuffed pig; Mother Corriveau's prayer becomes an unconscious blasphemy when her Hail Mary invokes a picture of the pregnant virgin. Similarly in Mireille's dream, her toes become transformed into waxen votive candles. Sometimes the grotesque incongruity is achieved by yoking something tragic or horrible with something comical. Thus Joseph's amputation of his own hand to avoid going to war is horrifying, but it becomes grotesque when the hand is casually substituted for the frozen turd and used as a hockey puck, that commonplace of Canadian life. Disruption or confusion of our usual single response (the comic laugh with the tragic cry and the gothic gasp) reinforces our awareness of the confusion of the traditional world views and values.

There is a literary resonance in this latter image of the amputated hand which Carrier seems to be playing upon. As Madame Joseph snatches the hand from the child and tucks it under her coat before going on her way, one immediately recalls that other grotesque occasion in *Le Chercheur de trésors* when Charles Amand snatches the *main-de-gloire* from under the noses of the medical students. The act of dismemberment is yet another variation on that recurring motif of bodily disfiguration in French-Canadian literature. Joseph's self-mutilation may be seen as a parody of the motif by a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*; Carrier may also be extending the gothic death motif by a symbolic suggestion of cultural masochism or suicide.

In other ways *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* plays with or disturbs our literary expectancies, further providing a sense of strangeness or estrangement. The view from the window in which a captive being (usually a woman) looks out from her isolated imprisonment is a repeated motif in gothic literature, but also has a

special place in Quebec literature, where the "captive" spirit often symbolically represents the isolated containment of French-Canadian society, cut off from participation in the larger outside world. One remembers, for example, the image of Maria Chapdelaine looking outward both longingly and in fear, from the confinement of her backwoods house, upon the forest and its avenues of escape. In the opening scene of *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* Joseph found, after cutting off his hand, that "cette fenêtre embuée qui le séparait de la vie peu à peu fut transparente, très claire." He had a brief moment of lucidity, in contrast to the image of Isobelle-Marie in *La Belle Bête's* opening scene, where she presses her face against the train window but soon sees nothing outside it. In nearly all cases there is a sense of a claustrophobic confinement behind the window. In *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* it is a nun standing outside in the cold who is cut off and who is left to gaze through an open window at the bustle of activity within. In this image Carrier does not seem to imply a reversal of customary meaning, that is, he does not seem to suggest that the inner group rather than the outer world is the source of vitality. After all there is death inside the room as well as without, in the coffin as well as in the decayed teeth of the nun. The nun's puzzling question as to who is alive and who is dead would rather suggest that Carrier means simply to disrupt or disturb the customary image and its cluster of associations.

TAKEN AS A WHOLE, the effect of *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*'s striking images is to startle the reader's thoughtful response rather than direct it; despite the visual clarity and dramatic impact, the images are most often ambiguous and paradoxical in their symbolic implications, unlike Carrier's later *Floralie, où es tu?*, in which the allegorical push is stronger and more insistent. Thus in this first novel in the trilogy, the grotesque alliance of horror and humour is essentially disruptive. Yet despite the sense of estrangement or absurdity which the disruptive grotesque usually expresses, *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* does not project a vision of annihilation but of cultural alteration.

Critics such as Ronald Sutherland have been quick to point out the similarity between Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*¹² Both stories revolve around a coffin, and describe the grotesque behaviour and attitudes of rural characters in response to the death of one of their own. The American's novels, like Carrier's, reflect what he regards as the moral confusion and social decay of his society, and, as Malcolm Cowley remarks, Faulkner is "continually seeking in them for violent images to convey his sense of outrage."¹³ Faulkner's characters, like Carrier's, have a double meaning besides their place in the story, also serving as symbols or metaphors with a general application. In both novels, the

incidents in the story represent forces and elements in society, although neither *As I Lay Dying* nor *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* can be explained as a connected, totally logical, allegory.

However, I think there is a fundamental difference in emphasis between *As I Lay Dying* and *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* In the former novel, the smell of putrefaction, both literal and symbolic, hangs heavier in the air. Although some of the characters occasionally show signs of Faulkner's later statement that "man will not merely endure: he will prevail,"¹⁴ survival seems an individual achievement in the face of a general social decay. In *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, by comparison, the collective assertion of life is as pronounced as the smell of Mother Corriveau's cooking. What one senses in the grotesque distortions and inversions of dying values is the presence of change as much as of destruction; it is less a story of death than of metamorphosis. The general sense of confusion — in the character's attitudes, in the symbolic values which issue from the story, and in the response of the reader — are signals of this process. Old shapes and images shift; patterns dissolve and the disparate elements come together in startling vivid new associations.

Carrier's reference to his trilogy as a depiction of "the Middle Ages of Quebec" reinforces this notion of change rather than doom as his central theme. In Carrier's reference, the Middle Ages stretches from a period before the second world war to the middle sixties, and encompasses the end of the parochial period, the discovery of the outer industrial world and the passage from country to city life. The medieval analogy is apt, since the twentieth century decades in Quebec, like those of earlier times, present an inward looking, church-dominated world, in which the old ways are no longer life-giving forces. It marks a time in which the gap between ideal and real, seen by many critics as the essence of late medieval "decadent" gothicism, becomes an abyss in which the traditional beliefs and social values are to tumble. Yet society did not collapse at the end of the Middle Ages, but was enlivened with a new life; the Renaissance was a transformation of the old into new modes of activity and awareness.

In *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* the Renaissance is not yet accomplished, but the process of change has begun. The novel is disruptively grotesque, not because of any overriding feeling of futility, but because there is no specific moral or philosophic framework against which the grotesque distortions may be judged. Carrier gives no real hint of the shape of things to come, but the undying energy of his characters and the constant upsurge of humour against horror, precludes a vision of total despair. In *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, as in the later *Floralie, où es tu?*, the process of metamorphosis is one in which the old grotesque encasements of society must be broken through, or overturned and discarded, before a new, freer being will emerge. In this sense, then, the wooden box carrying the body of Corriveau and by implication the whole of Quebec society is less a coffin than a cocoon.

NOTES

- ¹ Roch Carrier, *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, trans. Sheila Fischman (Anansi, 1970). First published by Editions du Jour (Montreal, 1968).
- ² Writing about *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, René Dionne states that the humour largely lies in the disproportion between the characters' psychological or social stature and their actual situation. "La Guerre, Yes Sir!" *Relations*, 331 (1968), pp. 279-281.
- ³ When discussing the base or false grotesque in which "grossness, of one kind or another, is, indeed, an unflinching characteristic of the style (Vol. III, p. 137)," Ruskin mentions, as an example of abominable detail, a carving at Santa Maria Formosa in which "the *teeth* are represented as *decayed*." However, the decayed teeth of Carrier's "saintly" nun do not indicate the diminutive power of the author's mind, as Ruskin would have it, but rather indicate the unhealthy attitudes of the purveyors of religion, while possibly satirizing the vacuous pink and white statuettes enconensed in households and in whose image the villagers attempt to place Esmalda.
- ⁴ Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto, 1972).
- ⁵ Nancy Bailey, "The Corriveau Wake: Carrier's Celebration of Life," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 111 (Summer 1972), pp. 43-47.
- ⁶ Carrier used this phrase in a seminar at York University.
- ⁷ Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* (New York, 1947), p. 25.
- ⁸ Ronald Sutherland, "La Guerre, Yes Sir!," *Canadian Literature*, 40 (1969) pp. 85-86.
- ⁹ D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, 1969).
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 253.
- ¹¹ Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley, 1969), p. 246.
- ¹² Ronald Sutherland, "Faulknerian Quebec," *Canadian Literature*, 40 (1969), pp. 85-86.
- ¹³ Malcolm Cowley, "Introduction" to William Faulkner, *The Portable Faulkner* (New York, 1967), p. xxi.
- ¹⁴ William Faulkner, "Nobel Prize Address," *The Portable Faulkner*, p. 724.
- ¹⁵ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, 7 vols., 1851-53 (London, 1906), Vol. III, p. 141.

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