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The Wars within the War in *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*

In his 1968 novel *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* Roch Carrier uses the framework of WWII and that war's intrusion into an unnamed village of rural Quebec to offer a darkly humorous, bitingly ironic, richly human, and politically savvy commentary about what it means to be Québécois. If, as some suggest, Carrier treats war's impact on the poor with "anger and scorn," (Hathorn 199), it is a controlled anger and a witty scorn. In *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* are at least three major themes telescoped within the overall topic of conflict: invasion by an external force; the opposition that responds to this invasion; and the challenge to identity that stems from the choices made in the course of that opposition. In other words, Carrier crafts stories within the story as he unfolds his tale about the wars within a war.

La Guerre, Yes Sir! has a silent character of central focus: Corriveau, a Québécois and soldier from the village. Killed overseas, he is being returned to Canada for burial, accompanied by an uncomfortable honor guard of six English soldiers and their sergeant. Arriving home on the same train is Bérubé, a village bully who serves the British Army as a latrine orderly. Accompanying Bérubé is his bride Molly, an English prostitute—Bérubé's first—whom he met and married while on duty in Newfoundland. The only thing more curious than Bérubé's marrying a prostitute is his motivation: he is afraid that he would have damned his soul had he not married her.

Other significant characters in the novel are Joseph, who evades military service by chopping off his own left hand, swearing that "they won't make jam" out of him as they did Corriveau; next, there is Amélie, who is hiding two men in the attic: her husband Henri, who is home on leave and who refuses to return to the European war, and her lover Arthur, who refuses to go to the war. The three become an ingeniously scheduled *ménage à trois*, the two men sharing Amélie's bed on alternate nights. The other principal players in the story are Corriveau's parents; the brutal village butcher, Arsène, and Philibert, the son whom he beats; Corriveau's sister Esmalda—a sister on two counts, since she has become a nun—and the village priest who has kept his faith but lost his charity. It is an appropriate metaphor of the coldness of official Québécois Catholicism that, as the priest closes Corriveau's funeral by casting holy water on his remains, the holy water freezes almost the instant it leaves the aspergill.

If, as some judge, Carrier has a flair for characters, but does not ever fully develop them (Cagnon 121), his art is in the manner his characters interact to produce a collective identity. The village itself is as much a character in Carrier's universe as any of the individual personalities whom we encounter. War is a malignant invasion that brings not only a sword, but a kind of ethnic pestilence as well. Like the train noisily ferrying Corriveau home, war mechanically, but surely, alters the fragile calm of what had been a snowy wilderness. War procures the young, deploys them to distant battlefields, and, as in the case of Corriveau, returns of them to the village in coffins. In war, there are the quick and the dead: for those who die, there is only burial; for those who manage to survive, there are inevitable wounds, physical (here we must include Joseph as a casualty of the war) and spiritual (Bérubé, ironically, being the most poignant example).

War has a harsh voice: as if to overcome his battlefield impotence, Bérubé corners the oafish Arsène and conducts a pitiless "manual of arms" training on him, barking orders and brutalizing the older man who simply lacks any sort of coordination. Thus is the abusive father himself punished by a devil in whom a soldier's discipline has taken a perverted, vengeful turn. War will not even permit the fallen Corriveau heroism—he meets his death not in the pitch of battle, but by triggering a land mine on his way to relieve himself behind a hedge.

Corriveau's wake—the central act of the novel's drama—mixes prayer and profanity, sorrow and stupor, sense and nonsense, in action as well as in language. The wake is as well the most stirring moment of the village's girded opposition to the invading presence of war and the allegorical duel of death confronting life and of life challenging death. As David Bond, Margaret Atwood, and others have suggested, the winter setting of the work is crucial. As symbolic of national character as it is of death, winter is a frequently occurring season in Canadian novels. As Bond emphasizes, not only is *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* set in winter, much of the action, particularly Corriveau's wake, occurs at night (Bond 61). Against this double metaphor of death, however, Carrier opposes convincing symbols of life. For every reminder at the wake that flesh is perishable, there is a counterargument of the body's vitality in the abundance of food, drink, and sexuality. As Margot Northey points out, Mother Corriveau beats the pie dough she will use to make the funeral *tourtières* (pork pies) with an uncommon violence, as if she were striking blows at death itself, at the same time welcoming the fragrance of the regional dish as the essence of life (Northey 17). Molly and Bérubé, responding to Mother Corriveau's insistent invitation to spend the night in her son's old room, make love—as the wake gets underway—in the part of the house directly above Corriveau's catafalque. In this juxtaposition, Carrier brings to bear one of his most powerful statements about life not only opposing, but positioning itself superior to death. Molly and Bérubé construct a passionate, even lustful, alliance that Carrier describes in terms of attack: "C'est la mort qu'ils poignardèrent violemment" ["It is death that they violently stabbed"](70).

In the action surrounding Corriveau's wake and funeral, Carrier uses irony, black humor, and "the sportive grotesque" (Northey 14-22) to raise the novel's most compelling issue: *who is the real enemy*? In principle, the Germans are the enemy, monstrously cruel, brutal and unfeeling, Arsène explains to Philibert, while repeatedly planting his boot in the poor lad's backside. Arsène's violence is inexcusable, but it is something to which Philibert, as a representative of the younger generation of Québécois , has grown accustomed. Arsène also has a fondness for blasphemous oaths that are representative of the whole village's profanity. War is violent, but the life in Quebec that the European war visits is far from idyllic, not just for the young, as Philibert, but especially for the women. Fatigued from bearing the winter's harshness, many are tired as well from having borne too many children, from raising their families, and from serving the men of the village who seem hardly to appreciate them. In fact, Amélie's ingenious manipulation of her lover and her husband is a singular triumph. Village life is certainly *not* ideal, but it is a way of life that the Québécois know, understand, and accept. The English soldiers who bear Corriveau's coffin do so in the course of perfunctory duty. As Nancy Bailey comments, the government in Ottawa has tactlessly sent a group of non-francophone soldiers to bring Corriveau back to his native village:

> Being unable to participate in the wake, unable to understand what is said to them, and unable to relax when on duty, they are forced into a posture of aloofness, almost as if their charge were to keep the unruly natives in order. (Bailey 45)

When a fight breaks out among the villagers at Corriveau's wake, the soldiers respond, mainly because they perceive their role as disinterested peacekeepers. Bailey's comparison of these events with problems elsewhere is pointed:

> This chain of incidents is a paradigm of so many situations today. The village could be Northern Ireland. Everyone is right, everyone is wrong, no solution will satisfy half the parties involved, and the poor British serviceman finds himself in impossible situations which he cannot understand, let alone control. (Bailey 46)

With neither sympathy nor animosity, the pitiful situation of the English soldiers is that they are unfeeling agents in circumstances of change that they simply do not comprehend. The disinterest that makes them efficient policemen is also a source of profound alienation. Unlike the villagers who eat heartily, drink heavily, and express themselves vehemently, the English soldiers eat little, drink little, and speak little. Though, because of the outbreak at Corriveau's wake, they take on the task of restoring order, it is an order they conceive from an uninformed distance. Insensitive to the life in which the villagers know themselves, well-intended English motives lead to disaster. One of the English soldiers dies during the fight, shot by the same Henri who had refused to return to the war, a turn of events that bitterly and ironically reflects pathetically opposed values made worse by a nearly complete lack of communication. Here, it seems, are no martyrs, only victims.

The most interior of Carrier's themes—and the most internal struggle—is the matter of identity. On arrival at the village train station, Corriveau's mislabeled body figures coldly into the stationmaster's inspection as baggage. When asked about what he's done with Corriveau, the stationmaster barks "Qu'est-ce qu'un Corriveau?" ["What is a Corriveau?"] (27) To his surprise, the functionary learns that Corriveau "is a coffin." The ignoble circumstances of Corriveau's death at least upheld his humanity. Now treated as a thing, war has leveled the ultimate insult. But Corriveau is, at least, beyond this disrespect once set down in the family home. Joseph's case is more pointed. Having agonized over which of his two hands he should cut off, he then loses the amputated hand in the snow. Madame Joseph later finds the hand, but her effort to return it to her husband meets with circumstances that are both pathetic and comic. She passes by an icy clearing in one of the streets where a group of youngsters are playing hockey. Fearful that the "brats" will try to have fun at her expense by tripping her and rolling her around in the snow, she strikes a pre-emptory blow with a stick to clear her way. Puzzled and offended, the boys strike back. In the fracas that follows, Joseph's dismembered hand—which his wife had tucked under her coat—slips from her and lands at center ice, where the boys substitute it for the horse dropping they had been using for a puck. The exchange of the frozen hand for the frozen excrement is an even more powerful message of dehumanization than Corriveau's temporary status as freight.

Corriveau's coffin takes on larger-than-life proportions as it rests in his parents' house, a caricature Carrier reinforces with Henri's surrealistic nightmare in which he sees this central symbol of death "swelled up as a stomach, as the sea," enlarging so much that all the people in the world march into it, as he says "comme à l'église, courbés, soumis" ["as in church, bowing, submissive"] (97).

If the State has been insensitive, the Church is worse. The novel's two principal religious figures—Esmalda and the village priest—speak and act in terms of death and distance rather than of hope or comfort. When Esmalda arrives for the wake, she refuses to set foot inside her girlhood home because of the rule of her religious order. Her statement, "il est doux de revenir chez ses parents" ["how lovely it is to come back home to one's relatives"] (73) is ludicrous as she stands outside in the snow. She poses a question not only of identity, but of survival: "Qui est mort? Qui est vivant?" ["Who is dead? Who is living?"] (73) Without waiting for an answer, she quickly follows her question with mirrored speculation: "Le mort peut-être vivant. Le vivant peut-être mort." ["The dead may be living. The living may be dead"](73). What seems at first reading to be nonsensical ambiguity actually leads into a theological inquiry. Esmalda adds:

> "Le péché peut avoir tué celui qui vit. Qui est sans péché? La grâce, don de Dieu, peut avoir ressuscité celui qui est mort. Qui a la grâce de Dieu?"
>
> ["Sin may have killed the one who lives. Who is without sin? Grace, the gift of God, may have resuscitated the one who died. Who has the grace of God?"] (73)

Esmalda's monologue presages the village priest's homily. As he exhorts the mourners that "nous vivons pour mourir et nous mourons pour vivre" ["we live to die and we die to live"] (115), he reminds them of the sure fires of hell awaiting the impenitent and that the flames of war God is visiting on the distant continent may be an earthly prefiguration of what awaits those whom God has not pardoned. Injecting a note of stern familiarity, the priest reminds them that, in his holy office of hearing their confessions, he knows every blasphemer, every fornicator, and every drunkard among them. In his Jansenist voice, he threatens his "stray sheep" with divine shearing.

Not surprisingly, most of the mourners answer the priest's threats with a response as earthy as it is courageous. Where Molly and Bérubé "stabbed at death" in their lovemaking, others express their hope in Corriveau's eternity—and their own—by downing large quantities of fortified cider and by stuffing themselves with meat pies. The unvarnished phrases the villagers have with God connect the believers with the Almighty through a more honest language than the village priest's admonitions.

Language is a weapon in *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* and Carrier opposes the speech of the English and French Canadians to reveal the much larger issue of cultural warfare. When the villagers perceive that British soldiers are about to steal Corriveau's body and respond accordingly, the soldiers in turn perceive inexplicable hostility. Unable to read through the barriers of language and custom, the two sides rapidly come to blows. "Let's go boys! Let's kill 'em!" is the Sergeant's furious command, a short fuse leading to the explosion of physical violence and incomprehensible dialogue between the English and what the text calls "les French Canadians" (107). The English soldiers echo the Sergeant's battle cry and the Québécois muster their best vehemence as the two sides fall into the combat:

> —Vous n'aurez pas notre Corriveau!
> [—You won't have our Corriveau!]
> —Let's kill 'em! Let's kill 'em!
> —Christ de calice de tabernacle!
> [—Christ of a chalice of the tabernacle!]
> —Maudit wagon de Christ . . . !
> [—Damned Christ wagon!]
> —Saint Chrême d'Anglais!
> [—You holy oil English!]
> —Nous aurons notre Corriveau!
> [—We'll have our Corriveau!] (108)

Bérubé, who had been sleeping upstairs with Molly, awakens to the disturbance and comes down. His first reaction is that of the villager he still sees himself to be: he wants to bash a few English skulls. However, as the Sergeant calls "Atten ... tion!," Bérubé freezes. No longer a pure Québécois, he has been tainted by English ways and English orders. Responding to the order to fight on the English side, he does so as if hypnotized, but with more passion than either the English or the villagers "in order to be respected" (108). This is not the beginning of his displacement—that event was his marriage to Molly—but the moment when he turns on his own people is clearly his point of no return. When Henri fires the fatal shot at the English soldier, he causes a death that balances Corriveau's and as the English carry away the body of their fallen comrade, they pray in English while the villagers pray in French for

Corriveau. Bérubé futilely attempts to pray, but he can do so neither in French nor in English. No longer the friend of Corriveau, neither is he accepted as the comrade of the dead English soldier. Attempting to straddle the fence between the Québécois and the English, he has impaled himself.

Bérubé's exile is a painful example of what Carrier develops as a profound statement about Québécois identity. The distant war changes the village, but Bérubé had already decided to risk adaptation. In many respects, he is the ultimate casualty of the war, more so than either Joseph or Corriveau. The larger war has taken Corriveau's life and, for a brief time at the train station, his personhood. But Corriveau recaptures in death what had eluded him in life: recognition—he is quite literally at center stage. Bérubé, on the other hand, dies to his own people while he still lives.

When Mother Corriveau greets her son's coffin draped with the Union Jack, she has no idea that it is "her flag." The symbol meant to unite two cultures into a sovereign commonwealth and to promote their mutual defense serves only to further divide them. The villagers have little respect for British protocol—they use the flag as a tablecloth. Having what they perceive as the real enemy's symbol thrust upon them, they reject it with the singular contempt of putting sustenance ahead of ceremony.

As the English soldiers take the flag that had covered Corriveau's coffin and transfer it to the roughly constructed one bearing their comrade, the second cortège makes its way out of the village, as the principal characters fade out of the novel. Because she is still wearing her wedding dress, Molly is the first to disappear against the whiteness of the landscape. Molly blends into the land almost naturally—she weeps from the heart as Corriveau is laid into his grave—and her assimilation into new surroundings by fading into the snow strikes as a metaphor of purification: her marriage has transformed her from casual companion to spouse and has in the process made her a villager. Bérubé, ordered by his Sergeant to help the English soldiers carry the dead Englishman's body, has a final presence perhaps as transparent as Molly's, but his transparency is a terrible hollowness.

Carrier's laconic conclusion "La guerre avait sali la neige" ["War had dirtied the snow"] brings us full circle. If Carrier leaves us with any hope at his novel's end, it is that Quebec will survive, because the snow, however stained, is also a symbol of Québécois tenacity. But those who are part of that setting—villagers, outsiders, and those who, like Bérubé, seem to have gotten lost—must somehow figure how to live with its altered identity.

As the principal players fade away, we must ask ourselves whether Carrier closes his novel on a note of optimism, pessimism, or simply one of numbed resignation. The wake itself is more than a celebration of life: it is the incarnation of a *carpe diem* that refuses to yield, even in the face of force. It is a restatement of the very essence of that certain gaiety of spirit in the face of chance and change. The events leading up to the wake and the events following it are sardonic vignettes that, rather than celebrate life, document human agony wearing a face of painfully drawn laughter. Joseph's decision about which hand to cut off is the statement of a victim who sees his act of cowardice as his only act of real courage. The adventures of Amélie's *ménage à trois* are intriguing and funny, but beneath any humor is a fundamental sadness about the children's lack of identity—who is their father?—and about what curious relationships human beings are willing to negotiate in desperate times. In the fight that breaks out between the villagers and the English soldiers, the hosts—the Québécois—find themselves tossed out into the snow by their unwelcome English guests. That Henri fires the shot that kills the English soldier is more than ironic—it is pathetic: he who refused to return to the larger war has inflicted the only death in the smaller one.

Many see *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* as both Rabelaisian farce and Voltairian satire, especially in Carrier's unforgiving and unflattering caricatures of Church and State. Of course the Union Jack stands out as a particularly invasive symbol representing, as it does, the vestige of an empire whose benefits the Québécois perceive as minimal and whose liabilities they see as summed up in Corriveau's coffin. When he acknowledged his debt to Voltaire in the 1977 interview in *Contemporary French Civilization*, Carrier spoke of the oppressive nature of the Church in shaping attitudes in Québec:

> Je crois que c'est au moment de la lecture de Voltaire que j'ai pris conscience, non pas d'une façon politique

> mais personnelle, de la présence de l'Église et de sa trop grande importance dans le pays.
>
> [I believe that it was from the moment that I read Voltaire that I realized, not in a political, but a personal way, the presence of the Church and its too great importance in the country.] (269)

To the interviewer's question, "But don't you feel that, in spite of itself, the Catholic Church in Quebec has been the guardian of a language and a civilization that might have otherwise disappeared?" Carrier qualified his critique:

> Je dois dire que sans l'Église le Québec sans doute n'existerait pas comme province francophone. On lui reproche de nous avoir enfermés dans une coquille, de nous avoir tenus très, très loin des développements de la fin du dix-neuvième siècle—début vingtième, mais d'autre part, grâce peut-être à ce renfermement, nous avons pu grandir pour en sortir ensuite.
>
> [I should say that, without the Church, Quebec would not have existed as a francophone province. One reproaches the Church for having locked us up in a shell and having kept us far—very far—from the developments of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, but, on the other hand, possibly because of this isolation, we were able to grow large enough to get out later.] (269)

The metaphor of being locked in a shell is also a key image that focuses on the wake and in many ways lends itself to the love-hate relationship that the villagers carry on with their Catholicism. It is because of the Church that the wake can take place, for the Church protects Québécois custom: the Protestant escort would be content to commit Corriveau to the ground with a haste that is efficient, but unnecessary. But the village priest, like the English sergeant, is "one set under orders." Here, the Red of the Army and the Black of the Church seem to look a lot alike: both are long on discipline and short on compassion. Esmalda, like Bérubé, has become an outsider, but where Bérubé has married out of his identity to flesh and blood, Esmalda espouses a religious order that literally forbids her return to the family home. Carrier emphasizes the repressive and unnatural character of such a commitment by the added dimension of the cold and the snow as Esmalda's companions as she attends her dead brother's wake from a distance.

There is in *La Guerre, Yes Sir*! a symmetry that is the key to Carrier's message. The novel begins in the cold and ends in the cold with an unsteady tabernacle of warmth in between. One of the more colorful oaths to come out the war within the wake is "Christ de calice de tabernacle!"—an irrevent allusion to the chalice of the blood of Christ and to the fellowship of communion. Here may be the refuge, not only from war, but from turmoil in general, political or otherwise. Between moments of mutilation on the one hand and spiritual death on the other, the wake is humanity's Last Supper, celebrated not in the moderation of bread and wine, but with the greasy pork pies and the local stout cider. The wake is no delicate rite—but neither is the climate, the terrain, or the totality of hardships that the Québécois have learned to endure in a war they must still fight. □

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Author's Note: *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* is available in its original French text (Montréal: Editions du jour, 1968) and in English translation (Toronto: Anansi, 1968).