
Exploring the Words and the World

by
Roch Carrier

The following is a transcription of Roch Carrier's remarks made at the Pallister French-Canadian Lecture Series organized each year by the Canadian Studies Center at Bowling Green State University. The series' namesake, Janis L. Pallister, Ph.D., L.D., Distinguished University Professor Emeritus of Romance Languages, is an accomplished scholar in her own right. Her vision and generous support for a dedicated endowment fund ensure that French Canada will be an enduring focus of the Canadian Studies Program. Her thoughtful introduction precedes Carrier's remarks about his early influences.

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Let us consider the portrayal of the two solitudes in a comparative mode. In 1969, the revolutionary terrorist Pierre Vallières published his political tract *Nègres blancs d'Amérique* or *White Niggers of America*. This book is violent, bitter, and unforgiving.

Though some would call Vallières a revolutionary saint, and certainly his book had its effect, I believe his writings are not very much sought after today. At virtually the same epoch, Roch Carrier shows us the same dilemmas, the same social tragedy expressed by Vallières, but with humor, wit, and irony: thus the absurdity of two cultures living side by side but never communicating is somewhat more readily apprehended here than in Vallières' work.

Indeed, we see expression of this divorce in *La guerre yes sir!* (1968) and *Le chandail* (which English speaking people know by title *The Sweater*, or *The Hockey Sweater*), a (1979) story, which Carrier scripted for the superb, animated film by Sheldon Cohen. Here the classic traditions of Québec culture are reflected, but also the fear of offending the English-speaking mogul, Mr. Eaton. In *Le chandail* Mr. Eaton looms as a threat, though humorously. Similarly, in *La guerre yes sir!* the English smile (stupidly) because they do not understand a word of French. Thus, Vallières' work is now nothing more than a historical document which one consults on that basis. Carrier, on the other hand, is still read every day and in many languages. Why? Because in such a piece as *The Hockey Sweater* we find the encapsulation not only of the tensions between Anglophones and Francophones in Québec, but an appeal to our inner child. We all have experienced such eternal and universal problems as having to wear clothes we do not like because our mothers tell us we must; we all are familiar with hero worship; we all have experienced feelings of alienation and the presence of authority figures that hamper our desires. Now, Carrier shows us this and more with an awesome range of humor, from the gentle mocking tone of *The Hockey Sweater*, to somewhat darker tones, to be seen in *The Celestial Bicycle* and *La guerre yes sir!*

Thus, unlike those of many of his contemporaries, Carrier's novels are now considered classics and are taught not only for the glimpses we are afforded of Québec and Anglo-Canadian conflicts, but of the Québec culture and world view, and—more profoundly—of the child, indeed of the human heart. This is seen in *The Hockey Sweater*. It is also seen in a less known screenplay, *Le martien de Noël*, directed by Bernard Gosselin.

Roch Carrier is as well admired for his talent at drawing characters that are highly colorful, and whose peasant verve recalls the heroes of Rabelais. Irony and humor are set along side the most serious of themes, which he addresses throughout his writing career: the situation of the rural Québécois, the treatment of war, violence, cruelty, eroticism, and sexuality.

Here one might speak specifically of the portrayal of solitude in the short story made into a three-minute silent animated film by the great woman director Suzanne Gervais. I am speaking of *La plage* that dates back to 1978. In it, a woman drowns, unnoticed by three men sitting with their backs to the sea. Two of them are throwing dice; the third is drinking a glass of water.

Also, as a portrait of Québec culture, Carrier's *Hockey Sweater* does not stand alone. One might cite as well a work entitled *Une bonne et heureuse année (A Happy New Year's Day)* (September 1991). Here the preparations for the joyous new year's day celebrations began long before winter came. In the summer, his grandmother made her cherry wine. The neighboring villagers painted and repaired their sleighs in anticipation of the winter's parade.

But we have, also, *No Country without Grandfathers* (1977), as well as *The Garden of Delights*, a tale of good and evil in a backwoods Québec village. In *A Lady with Chains* we are taken back to nineteenth-century Québec. In this work a woman plots the murder of her husband after the death of their child. After brewing a poison, she is arrested, denounced as a witch, and in a devastating conclusion, released from her terrifying obsessions. With the starkness of a medieval tale, *Floralie, Where Are You?* takes us back in time to the wedding night of Floralie and Anthyme Corriveau, parents of the dead soldier in *La guerre yes sir!* Here, beneath layers of fantasy and encounters with a panoply of mysterious archetypal beings, lies the theme of separation and reconciliation, portrayed through lifelike characters. Though we think of Carrier as painting rural characters, he does have an urban novel—*Le deux-millième étage* (1973)—set in contemporary Montréal.

We might also insist upon the avant-garde nature of some of Carrier's writings: before Steven Spielberg he imagined flying bicycles in his *The Celestial Bicycle (La céleste bicyclette)*, a work at once painful and delightful. It is arresting in the film narration of Albert Millaire.

A life-time lover of sports, in 1993, Roch Carrier wrote *The Boxing Champion* and in 1996 he wrote *Le joueur de basket-ball (The Basketball Player)*. Now he has turned to writing biographies, as we see from his book *Le rocket (Our Life with the Rocket)*, devoted to Maurice Richard, that great hockey player and idol of the small boy in *Le chandail*.

For these accomplishments and for many I have not here named, please welcome M. Roch Carrier, native of Sainte-Justine-de-Dorchester, Québec, born on May 13, 1937. He grew up to be a doctor of letters (from the Sorbonne), novelist, playwright, short story writer par excellence, scriptwriter, essayist, literary critic, biographer, educator, disseminator of culture—indeed former advisor to the Minister of Cultural Affairs—humorist, world traveler, sports enthusiast, contemplative, fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, Officer in the Order of Canada, recipient of the Stephen Leacock Medal for the humor in *Prières d'un enfant très très sage*; director of The Canada Council of the Arts, and Canada's National Librarian since October 1, 1999.

Remarks of Roch Carrier

I grew up in a small village in Québec—the French speaking part of Canada—very close to the American border. Many men from the village worked as lumberjacks in what we called “The States.” In my family, many people—uncles, aunts, and cousins—emigrated to the U.S., lived there for a while, and came back to the village very rich. When I was eighteen it was a great time in the U.S. with Bill Haley and the Comets and ‘Rock Around the Clock.’ Elvis Presley, the zoot suit, all of that attracted me. After finishing classical college, I wanted to hightail it to New York City to do like my uncles and aunt. By the road I waited and waited. There were more cows than cars. Suddenly there was this very fancy sports car like I had never seen before. He stopped and asked me, “Where are you going?”

“New York City.”

The gentleman said, “No, I’m not going there. I’m going to Montréal.” That is how I chose Montréal and made my life there.

My village was a completely French place. It was before television, of course. The radio was very bad. We would turn the knob and sometimes there would be noise between the stations. Later, we learned that it was English. There was only one person in my village that spoke English—the postmaster. He learned English when he was fighting in World War I. We had lots of lakes and sometimes American tourists would come to the village and stop at the gas station that was kept by my uncle who for twenty-five years lived in New York City. When American tourists stopped at the gas station my uncle would phone the postmaster, “I’ve got one!” The postmaster would run to come and speak English because he did not want to forget it. That was the extent of my exposure to English language.

My family came to Canada around 1657, a long time ago. My grandmother never heard a word of English, but she spoke with words we never heard anywhere before or anywhere else. She knew some very special, weird, French words. Later, I went to La Sorbonne in Paris and as a student of literature took courses on Rabelais, a writer from 16th century France. Now I am not so bright but I was the only one in the classroom who could understand what Rabelais was about. It is because grandmother used words that came directly from Rabelais. I had a great deal of fun just two or three years ago writing a book about my grandmother and her rocking chair. Working for months and months on my grandmother’s story, rocking in her chair, brought back many of those old words that were just forgotten. I would phone my brother and ask him if he remembered this or that word. “No, no, no. She never said that you invented it or you read it.” Then he would phone the day after, “Yes I remember she said that and do you remember she was saying...?”

There was a long, oral tradition. There were no books around because we were very poor. Today, as National Librarian of Canada, when I visit schools and see children sitting down on the carpet I ask them if they can imagine that in my home there were no books. Nevertheless, from zero books you can become responsible for the national collection of your country. Everything is possible.

There were many stories that we would listen to: ghost stories, stories of the past, stories of misery. Among those miseries there was one very deep misery so sad we cried tears. In 1759 the English came and conquered our land and we have been the victims of the English since then. We, the young people, looked at our parents and our grandparents thinking one day we will take the land back. We thought we were really French. If you want the proof I can still recite: Champlain, Montmagny, D'Ailleboust, ... Frontenac, ... Duquesne, Vaudreuil ... These are the names of the governors of New France that we learned one after the other with the dates. Now I am sixty-five and I still remember. Therefore, you see how grand this oral tradition was.

My dad was a small businessman who went from little town to little town. He would come back on Saturday nights from his trips and, although it was before television, he was like the Larry King of the village. He would put his horse in the stable and then go to the general store. He would stand there, smoking, not speaking a word. I learned as a kid that you do not tell your story unless people are really ready to listen to your story. Finally, the people at the store would say, "George, you have nothing to say?"

"Oh it has been a quiet week. Times are difficult."

"Yes, but do you have some news?"

"Well in this parish, in the corner of that street, in the country, there is this blue house. Now, it is not that one but the one in front of it. The one with the red window frames. In that house something terrible happened. The man was working in the woods and he returned unexpected. His wife was not at the door. His wife was not in the kitchen. He found his wife in the bedroom with the guy who owns the green house. When he saw that he went out to the barn picked up a cable and threw it over a beam. He made a big knot. . ."

Then my father pulled his watch from his pocket, "Oh! It is time for dinner."

He would cut the story there and leave. The writer I was to become learned something. Perhaps I learned a number of things in university, but nobody taught me such a good recipe as where to stop your chapter.

When I was nine and a half my dad came back from one of his trips on which he had been paid with books for something he sold. A set of thirteen books, all bound. I never saw that many books in my life. I opened a book and for me it was like a second birth. I still remember today the first article I read—*Why Is the Sky Blue?* The second one—*Why Don't Fish Drown?* It was marvelous! Then I discovered poetry and all kinds of things. I discovered Mount Palomar. At the time, they were building the huge telescope on Mount Palomar in California. The book explained the hugeness of the mirror and how they built it. It explained that they had to build a special float for the trucks to carry the mirror. They had to build roads to bring the trucks. It was fascinating. Last year, I was in California driving with my wife and suddenly I saw a sign: Palomar. Palomar? The Mount Palomar? Encyclopedia for Youth, Volume 12, page 4,052. I still remember that. Yes, I remember the page. That was an important experience for me.

From there I was sent to boarding school—referred to as classical college. We were exposed to Latin and Greek. We studied five to six hours of Latin a week and the same amount of Greek. We did not study English, yet. It was a little bit ridiculous, in a way, to work in those old languages when we were so young and so ignorant. At the same time it was opening doors. I have the best memories of having translated Homer. From translating Homer, terribly badly, I became a reader of Homer. There was this historian by the name of Flavius Josephus. I translated some lines about the city Masada. The Jews in Masada were attacked but instead of losing they just decided to kill themselves. That was very sad stuff for a young age. Later, I climbed the stairs from the Dead Sea to Masada thinking of those hours that I spent as an adolescent translating the difficult Flavius Josephus.

English came later. I was around fourteen when I had my first English lesson. Our masters probably had the same background as the people from my village that I just described to you. French Canadians were teaching English like a dead language, like they were teaching Greek or Latin. They were not crazy; they had good reason for doing that. If they had taught English in the proper way English would have been a living language. We would have learned English. We would be fifteen; we would be sixteen, then seventeen. If we learned English, probably we would be talking English. If we talked English, we would talk to English speaking girls. If we talked to English speaking girls perhaps something might happen and we would have English speaking, Protestant babies. That is what they did not want.

We started learning English. First lesson, page one: Venerable Bede. Now, what remains from those efforts, as you can hear, is not English, but a beautiful metaphor of what life is about. Through Venerable Bede I finally understood. In the wonderful poem *The Flight of the Sparrow*, Bede shows that outside is the cold night, turmoil, and unknown shadows. There is a window and behind the window is warm light. A bird flies through the night and goes through the window. It crosses the room where there is light, dancing, and food on the table. At the end of the room there is another window opening onto the night. This is life. I never found anything more wonderful to describe life.

Second lesson, page two: Beowulf, with Grendle the man-eater. I was doing some writing three days ago trying to describe a difficult situation. What came to my mind? Beowulf, Grendle, I went to my original text. When you are in the teaching business you believe that you are teaching one thing but your students are learning something else. This is quite a good principle.

Chaucer was lesson three, page three. We had to go through a lot of translations from Chaucer's English to modern English, modern English to American English, American English to Canadian English, Canadian English to French, French from France to Québec French, and finally we would understand what Chaucer was saying. In Chaucer I learned, again perhaps not English, but the music in the words. For a writer it is excessively important to find the words that just play the music, so not only do you have the words but also you have the music. I owe it to Chaucer when there is, in my humble writing, a little bit of music. Very often when I am trying to describe something, say a sleigh going in the snow, I try to suggest the music in this. I think of Chaucer.

Lesson four—*Pilgrim's Progress*. What remains is this beautiful sentence. Somebody asks Christian, "What are you buying?"

Christian answers, “The truth.” That is quite powerful.

It seemed that all the writers I knew were from Europe and they were all dead. From there I explored and my world was widening a little bit. I discovered two American writers. To pay for the printing of my first book of poetry I was working as a waiter in a joint where truckers would come and drink beer. So those truckers paid for my first book of poetry. In the drawer of my room I found a pocketbook by Salinger. I did not speak English, of course, so I read *Catcher in the Rye* with my dictionary. I discovered in *Life* magazine for the first time a writer who wrote about fishing—Hemingway. It was important for me to discover a writer that could write about experiences that were mine. My experience had so much to do with fishing and hunting.

Wanting to explore more about the world and words I went for a stay in France. Going to France and to Paris for me was like going back into a history book. My first dinner in Paris I was sitting in front of Notre Dame Cathedral having my sandwich and looking at the francs. I just could not believe that in that highly civilized country they had the drawing of Victor Hugo on the francs. That was quite a tribute, to have the photo of a poet on a bank note. That was really impressive. I did not know that many years later the Bank of Canada will phone me and will ask the permission to use two lines from my work and quote it on the five dollar bill.

It was a great time in Paris, the avant-garde time, the time of the ‘nouveau roman.’ There was a popular playwright by the name Eugène Ionesco. In those days I was writing one story a day. I really wanted to make it big. I understood that if you want to get big you have to meet with big people. How do you meet big people? You have to first find their secretaries. Second, you have to call up the secretary. This big writer, Ionesco, had a secretary. I called her and finally I had an appointment with Ionesco, the most famous playwright of the time. The god of the absurd, his plays were being presented all over the world. At seven o’clock in the evening at the corner of St. Germain and St. *Michel* in Paris we had been waiting for two hours. Finally, I see Mr. Ionesco coming. The great famous man completely drunk, as he was *sometimes*. I rushed to him, “Mr. Ionesco, I am a brilliant young writer from Canada and I write a story a day and I want to make it big.”

He looked at me, I’m not sure he saw me, and said, “Young man, literature is dead.”

Now something like twenty-five years later I was in Los Angeles and I discovered by chance that there was an Ionesco festival. In those twenty-five years I had written many books. I had written a film that was the first Canadian long feature film for children. (We worked on a budget of \$300,000. I discovered that after Steven Spielberg made *ET* the cinema students were comparing the two budgets; Spielberg’s and ours.) With all these accomplishments, I attended the Ionesco festival. There was a reception table and whom do I see? An apparition. All alone in a corner, probably because he does not speak English, I see the old Monsieur Ionesco. Not very solid on his feet and his legs were wobbling a little bit. He was drinking and he was alone. I rushed to him, “I met you in Paris twenty-five years ago!” He looked at me and said, “Young man, literature is dead.” I am not so sure that literature is dead. I think literature is more alive than at any time.

We talk about globalization of the world. Globalization, it is happening—no doubt. Internationalization is happening—no doubt. When we talk about globalization and the wonderful opportunities of technology, I agree completely. But time is not the same all over the planet. About two years ago I was in a country in Africa and like tonight, we were all bright and distinguished people. We had a very nice, distinguished, sophisticated state dinner. After the dinner, we went to our rooms where we wrote brilliant, distinguished reports to our different countries. In the morning after that beautiful dinner I learned that for us to have lights and electric current in our rooms they had to close half of the town. It is not the same hour all over the world in terms of globalization. In my job as National Librarian I tell people quite often that globalization is great, technology is wonderful, but not everybody is there.

In another country in Africa three days after that dinner, our country, Canada, gave a plough to the people of a small village. A plough to use with a horse to till the land is very difficult to find in the market in America. But we found one because they wanted it. Before this they had a wooden plough and the women would pull the plough to work the land. We were not very comfortable about this, but our gift was celebrated. There was food and a full day of dancing in the village. The authorities explained that at least the population of this village was reaching the new world of technology. In that context, yes, there will be an international culture. At the same time there is the awakening and asserting of many small local cultures. This will be for the well-being of our world because this richness of diversity is also the richness of nature.

It has been, for me, a great trip, a great experience. It is so easy. My Dad worked six days a week all his life until he could not work. What did I do? I put some little words on the paper and people are paying attention. People are saying very nice things. It has been a privilege. Lastly, when I went to university I registered in two different faculties, literature and law. I understood law to be very easy. The courses were from four to seven o'clock in the afternoon. The rest of the day I could take my literature courses and work in between to pay for my studies. I was called by the dean who explained to me I could not be registered at the same time in two faculties. I thought 'why not, I am doing it very well.' No, he said it was impossible because the programs are important and require all one's time. He told me I must make a choice. I do not know why, but I chose literature. I am not sorry because it has been and it is a great life.