

Reading “le grand livre de la Vie”: Roch Carrier’s *Les enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*

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Résumé de l'article

The question of reading and writing occupies a central place in Roch Carrier's *Les enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*, and is also fundamental to the short essay "Comment j'ai écrit *Les enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*" which appears in the 1983 edition. In the text, reading and writing are understood as an interpretation of the surrounding world; the book which Sister Brigitte teaches the children to read is *Life*. All of the characters engage in a more or less insightful "reading" of *Life*, and several stories — as well as Carrier's explanation of these stories — reveal a search for that mysterious point at which the secret of the earth will be disclosed. In interpreting the world, either in his "fiction" or "non-fiction," Carrier has embarked on a difficult journey; there is no book in which the totality of *Life* is apparent — past, present, and future — and no text that is a transparent vision of the entire world.

Reading “le grand livre de la Vie”: Roch Carrier’s *Les enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*

CAROLINE SHEAFFER-JONES

Écrire ne renvoie pas à ce texte absolu que nous aurions à reconstituer à partir de fragments dans les lacunes de l'écriture.

— Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*

I. “Turning Back”

THE COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES *Les enfants du bonhomme dans la lune* is one of a vast number of texts by Roch Carrier, whose work includes many novels,¹ short stories, and several plays. Some critics discuss “fantastic realism” in Carrier’s fiction (Dansereau 39-45; Bond 120-31); others highlight aspects of the author’s view of life and society.² In this article, I will focus on the stories of *Les enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*, which have often been read as vignettes of a certain period in the life of the young Carrier (Carrier, “Extraits de la Critique,” *Les enfants* 168-71). However, my purpose here is to reflect specifically on the question of reading and writing, which already occupies a prominent position at the start of the text. This issue is also fundamental in the pages entitled “Comment j’ai écrit *Les enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*,” which follow the short stories in the 1983 edition.³ Do these pages provide what would appear to be an autobiographical explanation of a fictional text?

In “Autobiography as De-Facement,” Paul de Man discusses the possibility of distinguishing between autobiography and fiction. He brings into question the notion of reference, thus undermining the difference between the two types of writing. De Man writes, “We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and

determine the life ...?" (69; original emphasis). Rather than considering the difference between autobiography and fiction to be simply unresolved, as does Genette in *Figures III* in a discussion of Proust (Genette 50 n. 1; qtd. in de Man 69-70), de Man suggests, from a different perspective, that autobiography is a "figure of reading or of understanding" which exists to a certain extent in *all* texts. For what is crucial, he states, is that "the author declares himself the subject of his own understanding": "any book with a readable title page is, to some extent, autobiographical" (70).

However, de Man affirms that at the same time *no* texts are autobiographical. The specular structure inherent in autobiography is not simply an occurrence that is part of history. What is interesting about autobiography is not the issue of "self-knowledge," but rather that "it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions" (71). Indeed, it is this lack of closure, tied to the question of reading and writing, that is significant with regard to the "autobiographical" text "Comment j'ai écrit *Les enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*" and the "fictional" short stories. By undermining the notion of reference, de Man brings into question the boundaries between non-fiction and fiction. Moreover, when this distinction is challenged, it is possible to approach both the "fictional" short stories and their "non-fictional" explanation above all as writing.

II. Reading and Recounting

Reading, and also writing, must be understood in the stories as an interpretation of the world around us, for the *book*, which Sister Brigitte teaches children to read, is in fact nothing but Life. It is as if the book were a transparent vision of Life. All of the characters who reflect on their situation are engaged in a more or less insightful reading of life, yet do they succeed in reading the book of Life? The question that returns in various forms in the stories is how one might reach that mysterious point at which the secret of the earth would be disclosed. Several stories tell of this search for truth, as does Carrier's explanation of his stories. However, if the moment of truth is always elusive, it is not because some abandon the search prematurely or because some overstep the mark, but rather because the revelation of an ultimate truth is in fact problematic. Through a close textual reading, I will underline the fact that Carrier's writing is not made of one piece and that some passages of the text are at variance

with others. Using this deconstructive approach,⁴ I will indicate that Carrier's conception of reading the great book of Life implies an impossible dream that cannot be realized.

Much can be learned about reading and writing in the first short story, which I will discuss before turning to Carrier's explanation of his text. Holding onto his book, the child returns home after his first day at school and tells his mother, "— Maman, j'ai appris à lire!" (9). They wait for the father to come back to the house. When the boy reads the sentence that he had learned that day, it turns out that he reads with an English accent. Not receiving the praise that he had expected, and reading "la petite phrase" (10) once more, the child insists that he reads exactly as Sister Brigitte had taught him. His father complains, "— Dis-moé pas qu'i' va apprendre sa langue maternelle en anglais" (10).⁵ This scene belies the child's initial statement that he had learned to read in a day; his reading needs further work. If the child has not managed to learn to read so quickly, at what stage might he *know* how to read? Perhaps this initial scene is indicative of the fact that reading, in particular in the sense of interpreting the world, is a complex task.

In this story, entitled "La religieuse qui retourna en Irlande" (see Darling 24-33), reading clearly assumes greater significance than the mere recognition of letters. Sister Brigitte describes her vocation. Her words are of critical importance in the text. Sister Brigitte became a nun and left Ireland and her village. She explains to the children during a reading lesson:

— Depuis ce temps-là, j'enseigne aux petits enfants. J'ai enseigné à des enfants comme vous qui sont devenus des grands-parents, de vieux grands-parents.

Tout entouré dans la cornette empesée, presque caché, le visage de sœur Brigitte n'avait pas d'âge; j'apprenais que sœur Brigitte était vieille, très vieille, puisqu'elle avait enseigné à des grands-parents.

— Êtes-vous retournée en Irlande?

— Dieu n'a pas voulu m'y ramener.

— Vous devez vous ennuyer de votre pays ...

— Dieu m'a demandé d'enseigner aux petits enfants la lecture et l'écriture pour que *chaque petit enfant puisse lire le grand livre de la Vie*.

(11; emphasis added)

When the child asks whether Sister Brigitte will return to Ireland at the end of her life, the nun admonishes him. Sister Brigitte has given her life to teaching little children to read and write, "pour que chaque petit enfant puisse lire le grand livre de la Vie." This does not simply involve read-

ing the Bible, but reading Life in the book of the universe. The emphasis is on instruction that leads to being able to read such a book.

How might the child read this immense book? At least so far, this grand project surpasses the capabilities of the child in the story. Sister Brigitte's mission focuses on understanding Life's experiences. In Carrier's text, little children, as well as much bigger children, are involved in trying to comprehend life. Which "child" could complete the daunting task of reading the great book of Life? It is no coincidence that Sister Brigitte's face was "ageless" and that she had taught grandparents. In this conception of reading, it is necessary to be very old in order to appreciate the "truth" about Life. Sister Brigitte would impart this wisdom to the children. The book, unlike the text as Derrida has emphasized, carries with it the idea of a "natural totality" (*De la grammatologie* 30-31).⁶ In this story, the book of Life, where "Vie" is written with a capital letter, certainly implies this totality. Sister Brigitte, by virtue of her age and experience, would *almost* understand *everything*.

However, if one needs to be old and experienced to fathom the great book of Life, it is apparent that one cannot be *too* old, for then one would fail. Towards the end of the first story, Carrier writes, "Nous savions que tous les vieillards perdent la mémoire et sœur Brigitte était un vieillard puisqu'elle avait enseigné à des grands-parents" (12). Sister Brigitte finally roams aimlessly in the snowstorm, where "on ne voyait ni ciel ni terre" (12). Although she might believe that she has completed the *whole* voyage of Life and that she is returning home to Ireland, the country of her birthplace, she has in fact reached a place where one cannot see clearly anymore. Not knowing what she is doing, Sister Brigitte is too old; she has lost her memory and certainly cannot finish the reading of the great book of Life.

What is obvious from this story is that reading the great book of Life is a difficult task to accomplish: one needs to be extremely old in order to understand everything, yet at the same time one cannot be so old that one loses one's memory. Sister Brigitte does not attain that indescribable point at which one might comprehend *everything*. Could one ever read the great book of Life in the way that the child believes he has learned to read on his first day at school? While a central project in the text is outlined in the first story, this story of Sister Brigitte, who loses her faculties, also testifies to difficulties encountered in the reading of the great book of Life.

In "Quand l'impôt crève le plafond," the roofless house is symbolic of the fact that life gives on to a vast space that cannot be contained. The narrator writes of the sky's grandeur, which he cannot seem to fathom: *matin, je m'éveillai grandi de l'immensité du ciel. Jamais je n'oublierais*

que *vivre sur la terre, c'est vivre sous le ciel*.... Il me serait impossible de *me voir* autrement que sous la forme d'une poussière perdue à la surface du ciel" (70; emphasis added). Seeing himself, his own reflections are virtually lost in the enormity of the sky: "Une grande inquiétude affola mon cœur. Était-ce déjà l'inquiétude de l'homme qui interroge la nuit sans rien savoir, sans rien comprendre?" (73). If the narrator's empty reflections show earthly life, which gives on to a sky without limits, how would he overcome this lack of knowledge? How would he comprehensively read the great book of Life?

III. Memories

In "Comment j'ai écrit *Les enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*," Carrier tells of the genesis of his stories. When he told an anecdote about his childhood on the radio, listeners demanded "d'autres souvenirs d'enfance" (165). His stories were then known throughout the country, yet he had not even put them onto paper. Subsequently, he wrote them down and refers to a finished manuscript — "j'y racontais mon enfance" (167) — that he entitled *Les enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*. The short stories are a reading of life. They contain memories of childhood, elements of autobiography that are necessarily fragmented. However, it is this incompleteness that the writer finds difficult to accept; he strives for totalization, the very conception that de Man brings into question.

To write one's memoirs clearly poses certain problems when the ultimate purpose involves trying to express life or interpret *all* of it. Indeed, the author tries to find the right moment at which to set about the task. The writer of "Comment j'ai écrit *Les enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*" states, "Écrire ses mémoires n'appartient pas à mon âge. Ce temps viendra trop vite, mais je me *livrerai* avec plaisir à cet exercice" (165; emphasis added). The future tense indicates that the writer needs to be older. It is as if his *whole* life needed to be incorporated into his book. Carrier's conception of writing memoirs implies a vision of all of life. Yet at what point exactly might he embark on the project? If he gathered all of his experiences together and wrote them down quickly at the point of death, might he then produce the ultimate reading of life? Would he then, in fact, reveal all of the secrets of the great book of Life?

The right time to envisage writing one's memoirs is certainly elusive. If one needs to be old to write memoirs, Carrier also asserts that the writer must turn back to childhood. Indeed he must see like a child: "Un

écrivain doit souvent se tourner vers l'enfance. À cette époque, il regardait le monde d'une manière dont il n'avait jamais été regardé. L'univers, par les yeux d'un enfant, est vu pour la première fois. L'écrivain aussi doit regarder le monde pour la première fois. Il doit donc garder son regard d'enfant ...” (165). What is significant is the writer's gesture of turning back, in order to capture the innocence of childhood. The writer would be like a child seeing everything for the first time and would depict an untainted vision. The writer must seize the purity of youth, yet retrieving this inspiration is not simple. Not only is the adult no longer a child, but the child could not see the whole universe for the first time.

Carrier's description of the writer who turns back can be compared to Maurice Blanchot's account of the poet Orpheus. The myth states that the poet and musician Orpheus could bring his dead wife Eurydice back to the upper world from hell if he did not look behind him until they reached the sunlight. However, he turned around and she was lost. Orpheus was eventually torn apart (Graves 111-15). In “Le Regard d'Orphée,” Blanchot writes about Orpheus's descent into hell towards Eurydice. She is for him “l'extrême que l'art puisse atteindre, elle est, sous un nom qui la dissimule et sous un voile qui la couvre, le point profondément obscur vers lequel l'art, le désir, la mort, la nuit semblent tendre. Elle est l'instant où l'essence de la nuit s'approche comme l'autre nuit” (*L'espace* 227; original emphasis). The work of Orpheus is not just to approach this “point”: “Son œuvre, c'est de le ramener au jour et de lui donner, dans le jour, forme, figure et réalité” (*L'espace* 227; original emphasis). Orpheus's work is to expose this spectre alive in the work. The extreme in art is to appear in his work. However this *origin* is nothing but the undoing of the work. It is represented to a certain extent by what Blanchot calls the eclipse of the work, that is its sudden disappearance, a reminder of the gaze of Orpheus.

The writer who turns back to childhood, as Carrier advocates, is like Orpheus in search of the “extreme” in art. However, a reading of several of Carrier's short stories and the explanatory text will show that, as in the myth of Orpheus, the gesture of looking backwards, whether it be accomplished by an author or by those who are engaged in interpreting the book of Life, cannot simply reveal a source of inspiration. There is no possibility of turning back to childhood, in the effort to recapture *all* of life in its purity. Totalization is impossible for the writer or for Sister Brigitte who is on the verge of death and has no memory. Reading, recounting the great book of Life needs to be conceived of differently. The impossibility of totalization brings to light the difficulty involved in the notion of reading Life. In fact, there appear only to be partial perspectives.

IV. The Other Life

The twenty stories of *Les enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*, each only a few pages long, show different, fragmented views. Unlike the early collection *Jolis denils*,⁷ for example, there is in fact an obvious frame of a narrator-writer who appears in the writing. There is a sense of a narrator who speaks in the first person about different times in his childhood and in some passages about himself as an adult. The frame of the narrator-writer is particularly evident, for instance, at the end of “La bombe atomique m’est-elle tombée sur la tête?”;⁸ also in “Grand-père n’avait peur de rien ni de personne...” when the narrator writes of the force of his grandfather’s huge hand on his own “main d’écrivain” (146); and finally in “Le secret perdu dans l’eau”: “Un jour quelqu’un entreprit de tourner un film sur mon village et ses habitants à qui j’ai dérobé beaucoup des histoires que je raconte” (161). The text forms a mesh of disparate fragments from diverse periods that are tenuously held together. There is some echoing, and even the staging of a double or opposite perspective in various stories, and this contributes to the richness of the text. Characters come and go; one witnesses the passing of individual lives. Figures such as the narrator’s friend Lapin, Duplessis, Monsieur Cassidy from the funeral parlour, or of course God, make appearances a number of times. In terms of the various perspectives put forward, the text gives the impression of the fragmentation of life.

It would indeed seem to be impossible to present a single, unified perspective on life, such as Sister Brigitte imagines. The characters in the text espouse countless points of view. There is a contrapuntal effect whereby one character’s situation is opposed to that of another. Polarization occurs for example in “Les bons et les méchants,” although in this case extreme positions on which the title depends, including anti-Semitism, are also implicitly brought into question, which undermines the discriminatory opposition. In “L’avenir, Mossié, est dans votre main blanche,” an awkward encounter between a white man and a black is described. While the text brings to light prejudice in some stories, it gives a portrait of many characters with their differences.

One story, which is of particular significance in relation to the project of reading the great book of Life, is “Il se pourrait bien que les arbres voyagent...” It tells of two contrasting characters, a father and son, who have had extremely different experiences from each other. The very old Herménégilde has never travelled but lived “enraciné à la terre de notre village” (124). His son Tobie, who, apparently, has seen the world, com-

plements him. The story begins, "Il y avait ceux qui avaient voyagé comme des oiseaux migrateurs et ceux qui avaient vécu, attachés à la terre, comme les arbres" (123). The narrator remembers having heard the tale of a man who went to the edge of the world, that is "jusqu'au point où le ciel rencontre la terre" (123; emphasis added). It is as if there were a point at which one might see everything. Indeed, the words echo the description of Sister Brigitte, who may have passed beyond this point, for where she was, "on ne voyait ni ciel ni terre" (12).

One day, Tobie arrived to take his father out in a black car: "— *Son père, dit le fils, vous pouvez pas mourir avant d'avoir vu un peu le monde*" (125). When old Herménégilde crosses the frontier of the village for the first time in his life, he closes his eyes. Just as in the divination of a water source in "Le secret perdu dans l'eau," it is as if one had to be blind in order to comprehend properly; it is as if any authentic act of seeing involved a gap in one's vision. Tobie believes that he is showing the world to his father, who is unconvinced:

— ... On sait que la terre tourne. Faut tourner avec la terre. Moé, j'arrête pas de voyager. J' connais le monde. J' connais la *vie*. Mais vous, vous avez jamais vécu dans les temps modernes. Faut voir ça.
— Un homme peut aller aussi loin qu'i' veut, dit le vieil Herménégilde, mais i' reste toujours dans ses bottines ... (125-26; emphasis added).

For Herménégilde, this trip in the car is, to a certain extent, *not* seeing "life"; to travel does not bring about radical change. On the return trip, he shuts his eyes again. His son tells him to look at the world, but it is as if the father, who is now too old, had overstepped a limit, somewhat like Sister Brigitte. He cannot see the world exactly, "— J'en ai *trop* vu, dit le vieil homme, tu m'as montré *trop* de choses aujourd'hui" (126; emphasis added). Herménégilde has seen too much and cannot see any more. Somehow he has missed that elusive point at which one would supposedly see the true light.

What do these two contrasting perspectives of father and son indicate about seeing life? To stay home like Herménégilde is supposedly not to see properly, yet then he sees too much. While pretending to have seen the world, Tobie exhibits a lack of wisdom and a harsh "naivety," as if he had seen or understood little of life. Most importantly, when Herménégilde goes on the trip to see the world, he shuts his eyes. It might be said that, although Herménégilde is more astute than his superficial son, he still does not manage to understand the world. How would he understand

everything with his eyes closed? In what way does he read the great book of Life? In “Il se pourrait bien que les arbres voyagent...,” two different perspectives on life are shown, yet neither character comprehends all of life. Neither Herménégilde nor Tobie is an example of one who attains the ultimate vision of Life.

Death is indeed very much part of life in the stories. Yet death is also an obstacle as far as the conception of reading the great book of Life is concerned, for how might one read “Life” if one’s own life is finite? In “Un grand chasseur de fauves,” Louis Grands-pieds cannot bring himself to kill “cet orignal, cette bête vivante, respirante ... cette tête au regard si humain” (97). The beast fled, and the hunter finally put a hole through his own head with a bullet.⁹ This story may be considered in conjunction with “La mort imbecile” in which the father announces at the beginning, “— demain, mon garçon, j’ t’emmène avec moé; ça va te faire du bien de *voir la vie*” (23; emphasis added). In this story, Philémon aims a rifle directly at the boy’s father and states without mercy: “— Georges, si t’étais un chevreu, t’aurais pas de chance aujourd’hui, Ah! Ah!” (26). The boy’s father is terrified; both the boy and the father are paralysed. The man is now in the defenceless position of the hunted victim. Finally, maintaining that the gun is not loaded, Philémon points it into the sky and it fires. This experience of “seeing *life*” is not what might be expected. Indeed was this the type of knowledge that sister Brigitte was hoping to impart to the little children? Is it not evident that her project, like that of the writer turning back to childhood, reflects an unattainable vision of life?

V. Passages

It would appear that there is another lesson to be learned that differs from instruction in the school. Would it perhaps provide another approach that would enable one to read the great book of Life? In the final story, “Le secret perdu dans l’eau,” the boy’s father shows him how to find a water source using a bifurcated stick. He must hold each fork of this “Y parfait,” which, as the narrator states, is “plus mince qu’un crayon” (160). This statement takes the reader back to the discussion of the simple, straight letter “I” at the beginning of the text: “C’est en traçant le mot Irlande que j’ai appris à tracer le I majuscule” (12). The father instructs his son to close his eyes. Then, feeling the branch move, the boy hears a sound like a river. It is in this state of blindness that he supposedly divines water, that “eau vivante,” “pure” (89), which was so critical in “Les renards

demandent de l'eau fraîche." His father tells him, "— ... J' viens de t'enseigner comment trouver une source. C'est mon père qui m'avait enseigné ça. C'est pas une chose qui s'apprend à l'école. C'est pas une chose inutile: un homme peut se passer d'écriture pis de calcul, mais i' pourra jamais se passer d'eau" (160).

Years later, as an adult, the narrator visits a farmer when the film is made of the village inhabitants. The farmer tells the narrator that he had kept the branch with which the father had divined water for him. Touched by some piety, the narrator felt close to his father: "derrière mon épaule, mon père m'observait" (162). He shut his eyes and tried to hear "le bruit de l'eau qui jaillit ..." (162; emphasis added), the sound "i" in these words echoing the "i" associated with the fanciful "bonhomme dans la lune" (166).¹⁰ Doubled by the shadow of his absent father, the narrator does not finally succeed in divining water in "Le secret perdu dans l'eau": "Le long des chemins que j'avais parcourus depuis le village de mon enfance, j'avais oublié quelque part la science de mon père" (162). The inability to retrieve a pure source is conceived of in terms of a *loss*, as is the difficulty of transmitting knowledge, or anything else in recent times, to the following generation. Yet the act of divining water *always* required blindness. This is indicative of the fact that what was passed on by the boy's father was never anything but partial understanding; the father's science was never absolute knowledge.

There is nostalgia in the stories and in the description of their genesis. "Vie" is associated with another life: that of the imaginary man in the moon and his "bruit de la scie i-i-i-i" (166). Having become a writer and a father, the narrator of "Comment j'ai écrit *Les enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*" states that he pointed out the man in the moon to his daughters on a visit to Cape Kennedy. One pitied him; the other replied, "— Papa, il n'y a personne sur la lune. La lune est inhabitée. *Il n'y a pas de vie*" (166; emphasis added). The narrator persists; he was of the generation that believed in the man in the moon and so would call his manuscript *Les enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*. It is as if, to a certain extent, the writer needed to turn away from the earth in order to value imaginary life elsewhere.

At the end of "La bombe atomique m'est-elle tombée sur la tête?," the narrator recounts the day on which he told his friends that the little shoemaker, who had lived in the family home before his death, had now remade the boy's beautiful, sparkling shoes. The boy was ridiculed and asked whether the atomic bomb had fallen onto his head. The narrator writes that a few days previously, the Americans had dropped the Hiroshima bomb, "une bombe qui avait brûlé vifs des milliers de femmes,

d'hommes et d'enfants" (18). He tells of this carnage in which thousands of people were burned *alive*. One cannot but remark that "life" in this sense is closely linked to death; life is already marked by dying. Although the event was reported in the media and the narrator says that he must have heard of it in discussions between his parents, he cannot remember the day of Hiroshima that was indeed part of his childhood.¹¹ This memory lapse is significant. The massacre of so many is missing from his memory (see McHugh 268-73), and instead there is the recollection of the shoemaker with the clubfoot. The narrator's memory is compared to a book. Something has been left out of it. It does not recount the whole story; it is "incomplete." It has holes in it:

J'ai fouillé dans ma mémoire, j'y ai cherché ce jour d'enfance, comme l'on cherche, page à page, paragraphe par paragraphe, un passage dans un livre déjà lu. Au lieu d'y trouver un souvenir dont l'éclat aurait dû brûler un coin de ma mémoire douloureusement, je ne puis me souvenir, dans cet automne, que du petit cordonnier au pied bot.

Ce trou de mémoire m'agace mais sans doute l'homme ne choisit-il pas ce qui vient hanter sa mémoire.

Dans l'autre vie, quand les gens d'Hiroshima se rappellent la terre, ils doivent revoir la vive explosion qui arracha leur corps à leur âme. Je souhaiterais plutôt qu'ils puissent se souvenir d'un petit cordonnier au pied bot qui, pendant leur sommeil, venait réparer les souliers usés d'avoir trop joué sur une terre couverte de pissenlits et de marguerites. (18-19)

The narrator recognizes a memory lapse ("trou de mémoire," 18). His memory is a book with holes in it, for he cannot find the passage about Hiroshima. In "La bombe atomique m'est-elle tombée sur la tête?," it is as if the narrator had a hole in his head, on which the bomb might have dropped; indeed Louis Grands-pieds put a hole through his head with a gun. Like the author who turns back, the writer can only write down memories which are incomplete. *Mémoires* ("mémoires," 165), which one would supposedly write in old age to encompass all of life, are nothing but a myth. In his memory, in that book in which he has taken stock of the world, the narrator compensates for the horror of the war. He invents an idyllic scene "dans l'autre vie" for the people of Hiroshima who remember the earth. It is as if, once outside the frontiers of this world, they might survey all of their life and at the same time re-experience it through rose-coloured glasses. Yet what about the very possibility of turning back from

some “other life”? The “other life” is nothing but the passage through this life. The *memory lapse* is another indication of the impossibility of omniscience, evident elsewhere in the stories and hence the difficulty encountered in reading the great book of Life. For example, it is apparent that Sister Brigitte’s memory fails; the child, to whom the writer looks back at the beginning of the first story, could not read; neither Herménégilde nor his son Tobie understands everything.

In Carrier’s conception, the writer is neither old enough nor young enough to reach that point at which he might recapture the secret of life. On the one hand, he cannot yet write memoirs, because they would be incomplete; however he risks losing his memory as he gets older. On the other hand, in turning back, he is not young enough because he has memories that do not square with the supposed purity of the child’s vision. Indeed, to tell *all* of his life the writer would need to speak from beyond the grave, once his life is over, while portraying the pure *tabula rasa* of an innocent child. He would gingerly try to look back from the “other life,” or perhaps from a distance, as does the man in the moon depicted in “Comment j’ai écrit *Les enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*.” Yet this vision is impossible, like that of Eurydice. It is a nostalgic dream that attempts to capture all of life at some extreme point.

Autobiography in de Man’s conception is a “figure of reading or of understanding” and all texts, yet no texts, are autobiographical (70-71). As de Man emphasizes, in autobiography totalization is impossible. That means that there can be no complete reading or understanding in autobiography, and thus reading the great book of Life is a project fraught with difficulties. Rather than continuing to strive for some point at which to tell the whole story of Life, rather than pretending that one is almost at that moment of revelation, it must be recognized that there is no ultimate truth. There is never a chance to reveal the whole of existence in one pure vision. Instead, the writer looks back repeatedly, as does Carrier both in his “fictional” short stories and in their “non-fictional” explanation. This is not a temporary measure while he bides his time to write memoirs, which would supposedly be comprehensive. There is no such thing as memoirs in the sense of the representation of a total picture. The memories that the author writes down at any age are the only memoirs (“*mémoires*,” 165) that exist. His text is always unfinished and rewritten. It is evident that there is no possibility of envisaging a complete account of Life at any age. If, as Carrier finally admits, “sur notre belle Terre, tout n’est pas montrable” (167), it is because the great book of Life is nothing but different, fragmented perspectives. The book *of* the child, the one

who is young and the one who is older, clearly always shows blindness and misreadings. The narrator-writer, who is part of the frame, displays the same limitations (Derrida, "Le Facteur" 439-524) as the other characters who represent different perspectives.

With reference to Nietzsche, in "La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines," Derrida opposes a nostalgic conception of non-totalization to one in which a Nietzschean notion of play is paramount. Rather than a system that strives impossibly to encompass a field that is always too great, as in the classical conception, a notion of play is affirmed with an *absence* of origin or centre (*L'Écriture et la différence* 423). Derrida writes about this other side of the thought of play which is not simply nostalgic: "*l'affirmation nietzschéenne, l'affirmation joyeuse du jeu du monde et de l'innocence du devenir, l'affirmation d'un monde de signes sans faute, sans vérité, sans origine, offert à une interprétation active*" (427; original emphasis). Carrier is engaged in an autobiographical (de Man 67-72) reading, both in his short stories and in his explanation of them. In interpreting the world, be it in his "fiction" or his "non-fiction," Carrier has embarked on a difficult journey; however there can be no revelation of absolute knowledge. What is at stake is not a quest that could be accomplished once and for all. There is no book in which the totality of Life is apparent — past, present, and to come, as if the text were a transparent vision of the whole world. Rather than striving towards an illusory revelation of the great book of Life, it is necessary to affirm reading or interpreting the world as an *ongoing process* that takes place from many different perspectives at all ages of life. Since there is no point at which the reading of life simply ends, or begins, one might well say with Sister Brigitte, or other children: "— Continuons la leçon de lecture" (12).

NOTES

¹ Roch Carrier's renowned trilogy is entitled *La trilogie de l'âge sombre*. See also Poulin 89-138.

² Cf. "Carrier bears witness to the transformation of a community — in his case, Quebec — that he dramatizes by means of various techniques" (Lennox 48).

³ Carrier, *Les enfants du bonhomme dans la lune*, 165-67. At the end of the text is the date "août 1983." The title of this "explanatory" writing is perhaps reminiscent of the gesture of Raymond Roussel in *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres*, although the texts are obviously very different.

⁴ It is well known that Jacques Derrida initiated the work of deconstruction. See, amongst other texts, *L'Écriture et la différence*; *La Dissémination*.

⁵ On the issue of popular language in the text, see Walkley 14-17 and 33; Bérubé 145-64.

⁶ From another perspective, see also Blanchot, "L'absence de livre," 620-36.

⁷ It is interesting to note that for the republication of *Jolis deuils*, almost twenty years after the original date of publication in 1964 by the Éditions du Jour, Carrier writes a few pages entitled "Petite histoire de *Jolis deuils*," dated July 1982 (*Jolis deuils* 161-64). See also Cloutier 40-47.

⁸ Similarly, long titles are used for example in each chapter in Carrier's novel *De l'amour dans la ferraille*: "Comment les tendres se trouvent un cœur de pierre et les durs se découvrent un cœur tendre" (244) or "Faut-il s'éteindre pour voyager à la vitesse de la lumière?" (256).

⁹ This reversal of roles or the act of putting oneself in the position of another is evident in "Un dompteur de lions," when the lion Boum leaps at Léon the lion tamer and the tamer devours the lion (*Jolis deuils* 47-48).

¹⁰ One might compare the passage on the sound "i" with another brief discussion of vowels in Carrier's *L'Ours et le kangourou* 13.

¹¹ This "jour" is referred to as "ce jour d'enfance" 18; "jour" also in the sense of "ouverture, fissure par où le jour, l'air peut s'insinuer," Littré.

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