

The two authors share a combination of humor and sad longing. Their non-sequitur dialogues develop from the "slice of life" conversations of the 19th century: see, for example, Henry James's turn-of-the-century *The Awkward Age*. Stein's and Barthelme's apparently random but actually carefully controlled dialogues take narrative in the direction of poetry. Though nothing "happens" during the dialogues, the compositions are not static. Recurrent lines give witness to the restless movement of memory and anticipation and create new meanings in their constantly shifting contexts.

Stein once implied that a writer writes in order to "measure every daughter and to lessen every sister and to manage every mother and to sever every brother and to undertake a father." (*GP*; p. 135). Barthelme could have garnered his subject matter for *The Dead Father* from just such a list: the long burying of a father who won't stay down. And when he seems to follow Stein's style in the Julie-Emma conversations, the older author might well proclaim grandly, as she does in the first lines of "Ladies' Voices (Curtain Raiser)": "Ladies' voices give pleasure" (*GP*; p. 203).

## Ironic Intertexts: Echoes of *René* in Gide's *Isabelle*

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This paper considers Gide's 1911 *récit Isabelle* with an eye to catching the echoes of Chateaubriand's *René* that it contains, and to interpreting the significance of those echoes for Gide generally as a narrative writer. The evidence for identifying *René* as an intertextual model for *Isabelle* involves such elements as the use of a first-person narrator, a frame narration, and letters. In examining these elements, it will be our objective to show that Gide's intertextual relationship with Chateaubriand's novel is both ironic and self-conscious, as his literature generally and his *récits* specifically tend to be. In the conclusion, we shall elaborate upon the ramifications of Gide's ironic intertextuality for an understanding of *Isabelle's* place in Gide's development as a novelist.

We can begin our consideration of the textual evidence linking *René* and *Isabelle* by detailing the similar use in the two novels of a frame. Chateaubriand's novel begins, one will perhaps recall, with the voice of an unidentified frame narrator who, for the first page or two of the novel, presents three characters who will play a role in René's first-person account of his life: they are René himself and the two characters he addresses in the text, his two narratees, Chactas and le père Souel. It is indeed at the urging of these two narratees that René, who claims his story is too personal to be of interest to others, finally agrees to give his first-person account; we are told that "René avoit toujours donné pour motif de ses refus, le peu d'intérêt de son histoire qui se bornoit, disoit-il, à celle de ses pensées et de ses sentiments."<sup>1</sup>

Gide's *Isabelle* displays the use of a narrative frame which is strikingly similar to the one we have just noted in *René*. The novel begins with the voice of an

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<sup>1</sup> Chateaubriand, *René*, ed. J. M. Gautier (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1970), p. 30. Subsequent references are to this edition.

unidentified frame narrator, although his voice is in the first person rather than the third person of Chateaubriand's text. Three narrative participants are introduced by him: Gérard who will provide the first-person account which constitutes the main story in the novel plus two narratees, the poet Francis Jammes, and the frame narrator himself at some time in the past. (Although this narrator is an unidentified literary figure, readers are likely to assume him to be Gide himself.) Gérard, like René, must be encouraged to relate the mysterious story which his friends are eager to uncover and which he also claims is too personal to be of interest to them: "Vous permettez alors que je parle beaucoup de moi, dit Gérard.— Chacun de nous fait-il jamais rien d'autre! repartit Jammes."<sup>2</sup>

There is another very striking narrative similarity between *René* and *Isabelle* which lies in the use of letters as a distinctive narrative element. Those letters serve, notably, to hint at the deep, dark secret which is central to the plot in both novels. The deep, dark secret—referred to, interestingly enough, in both cases as "l'affreuse vérité" (*René*, p. 66; *Isabelle*, p. 670)—is Amélie's incestuous passion in *René* and Isabelle's murderous plot in Gide's novel. In both novels, the secret is first and partially revealed through the letters in which the female protagonists themselves disclose or allude to, in the first person, the nature of their secrets. The ultimate revelation in both works also occurs in a similar manner, to wit, orally, by the female protagonist.

Now, there are at least two noteworthy features of the narrative similarities between *René* and *Isabelle* detailed above which suggest that Gide's attitude towards his intertextual model was an ironic one. One concerns the frame and the other concerns the female protagonist's revelation of "l'affreuse vérité," initially in a written and then an oral form. In *René*, the frame narration occurs in the month of May, at dawn, with the three narrative participants seated on the grass at the foot of a tree. Through the use of such positive elements as springtime, morning, and nature, Chateaubriand makes a positive statement about René's youth and the hope and faith it inspires in Christians like René's narratees Chactas and le père Souel.

In *Isabelle*, in contrast, the frame narration occurs in the month of August, in the evening, in an interior setting. A sense of dejection, decline, and weariness marks a narrative act set thus at the end of summer and the close of day. By setting a negative tone in the frame narration, Gide makes a negative statement about Gérard's youth which elicits an ironical response from disillusioned, intellectual narratees like Jammes and the frame narrator. What they see in Gérard, specifically, is a nefarious kind of romantic illusion fostered precisely by texts such as *René*. Elsewhere, I might add, Gide makes clear his critical attitude toward Gérard's romantic illusions: *Isabelle*, he says, is "la critique d'une certaine forme de l'imagination romantique."<sup>3</sup>

What Gide is doing here, I suggest, is systematically emphasizing the differences between the frame narration in his novel and in a work such as *René*. In conscious protest against Romantic works like *René*, he is alluding to them and signaling them as his target. Such allusions and signals can be referred to, as critic Goran Hermeran suggests, as "antithetical similarities"; "there are similarities between the two authors—they deal with the same topic, they discuss it from the same aspects, they can be compared to each other on a number of specific points"; yet at the same

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<sup>2</sup> André Gide, *Romans* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1969), pp. 602-03. Subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> André Gide, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Louis Martin-Chauffier (Paris: Gallimard, 1932-39), XIII, 439-40.

time, "what one author says on these points is the antithesis of what the other says."<sup>4</sup> It is through his use of such antithetical similarities that Gide alludes to *René* as an intertextual model and fosters irony.

An ironic note can also be discerned in Gide's novel if we compare the revelations which the female protagonists make in *René* and *Isabelle*. Amélie writes to René, obliquely alluding to her secret passion, in elegiacal, romantic sentences such as the following: ". . . je songerai à ces promenades que je faisais avec vous au milieu des bois, alors que nous croyions retrouver le bruit des mers dans la cime agitée des pins" (p. 57). Isabelle, in contrast, writes a letter to her lover Blaise de Gonfreville, whom she will have murdered by her servant, in which she expresses concern about such uninspiring topics as robbing her mother's jewelry or getting her feet wet when she and her lover elope. In both style and content, Isabelle's letter displays the kind of antithetical similarities to Amélie's which promote irony.

It is also worth noting in this regard the contrasting ways in which the final revelations are made. René's saintly sister Amélie, at the moment of taking her vows, lets the awful truth escape from her lips; and the somber setting of a church helps to sanctify and excuse her sin. The object of Gérard's romantic illusions, the manipulative and mendacious Isabelle, makes her revelation in the same setting in which René told his story to Chactas and le père Souel, that is, in a natural setting, seated at what would have been the foot of a tree, had Isabelle not had the tree chopped down; she has thereby demonstrated her disregard for that nature so venerated by Chateaubriand and his Romantic generation. Thus whereas the narrative setting in *René* encourages the reader to excuse Amélie for her "sin," the antithetically similar setting in *Isabelle* encourages the reader to condemn Isabelle for hers.

We can conclude this consideration of Gide's ironic intertextual use of *René* in *Isabelle* by observing, following critic Anne L. Martin, that *Isabelle* has wrongly been associated by critics more with Gide's  *récits* than with his novels, that is, more with a morally than with an aesthetically focused kind of fiction. As Martin reminds us, Gérard is, *inter alia*, an aspiring novelist; and she notes that "Gide . . . by centring his story on a would-be novelist and not on a morally reprehensible heroine, shifted its centre of gravity from an ethical to an aesthetic axis . . . Despite its masquerade as a  *récit*, *Isabelle* is in the lineage not of *La Porte étroite*, but of *Paludes* and of *Les Caves* and *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, for which it clears the way."<sup>5</sup> Intertextuality in *Isabelle*—that work's self-conscious, ironic reference to its literary predecessors and conventions—lends significant additional support to Martin's interpretation of the novel. And by extension, it lends additional support to the case which I, for one, would want to make about Gide, namely that there is a truly literary nature to all of his narrative texts—texts which in the past were perhaps scrutinized too often for their superficial philosophical and personal models and too rarely for their profound intertextual, properly novelistic ones.

## "*Watership Down*: Tale and Myth"

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By the end of 1972, Rex Collings, a small British publisher, took the risk of publishing Richard Adams's first literary attempt, a novel about talking rabbits called *Watership Down*. Despite the fact that the book had been rejected by several agents and publishers before Collings, *Watership Down* became an enormous success,

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<sup>4</sup> Goran Hermeran, *Influence in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 45-46.

<sup>5</sup> Anne L. Martin, "Isabelle, or André Gide at the Crossroads," *Essays in French Literature*, 14 (1977), 44-45.