

9-1-1977

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### Recommended Citation

Booker, John T. (1977) "The Immoralist and the Rhetoric of First-Person Narration," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1043>

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## The Immoralist and the Rhetoric of First-Person Narration

### Abstract

Gide's *The Immoralist*, a short first-person novel written at the beginning of the century, has long been seen as an early example of the unreliable narrator. More recently, critical attention has focused on the tensions set up in the work between the carefully drawn formal structure of the narrative and the claim of Michel, the narrator, to tell his story in a direct and simple manner. Of more general interest, however, is the way Michel's narration provides insight into important developments that have taken place in the first-person novel itself in the twentieth century. Cast initially in a very traditional mold, Michel's story breaks down progressively as it moves from events of a more distant past to those much closer in time to his moment of narration. This breakdown of Michel's narrative seems to presage the movement in the first-person novel in France away from the relation of a story as traditionally conceived and towards the increasing importance accorded the present of narration itself. In that sense, *The Immoralist* is a key, pivotal work in the long line of short first-person works of fiction in France.

### Keywords

Andre Gide, The Immoralist, L'immoraliste, first-person, narration

## THE IMMORALIST AND THE RHETORIC OF FIRST-PERSON NARRATION

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Published in 1902, Gide's *The Immoralist* seems almost to straddle two centuries without belonging clearly to either, a position analogous to its place in a long line of short first-person novels in France. By its general form and plot, it is inevitably compared to *Manon Lescaut* and *Adolphe*, earlier memoir-novels in which a troubled narrator relates from retrospect a liaison or marriage that ended unhappily in the death of the woman, and in that sense Gide's novel belongs to a fictional cycle that dates from the early eighteenth century. From our perspective today, on the other hand, *The Immoralist* appears to open a series of modern novels in which the narrator's awareness of the impact of his story upon reader or listener — and hence his own sincerity or credibility — are questions of central importance; in that respect, Michel's narration can be seen as a very subtle preview of that of Clémence in *The Fall*.

*The Immoralist* owes this pivotal place in a certain line of French fiction to its narrative structure, which marks it unmistakably as a work of our century. Michel's story shows the essential characteristics of "discourse," as Emile Benveniste has defined and studied it: "any enunciation involving a speaker and a listener, and on the part of the former the intention of influencing the other in some way."<sup>1</sup> The rhetorical bias to which Benveniste calls attention has in fact come to be recognized as one of the real points of interest in *The Immoralist* and the question of the narrator's reliability is raised very early in the story by Michel's claim to speak in an open and straightforward manner: "I am going to tell you my life simply," he assures his three friends, "without modesty and without pride, more simply than if I were talking to myself."<sup>2</sup>

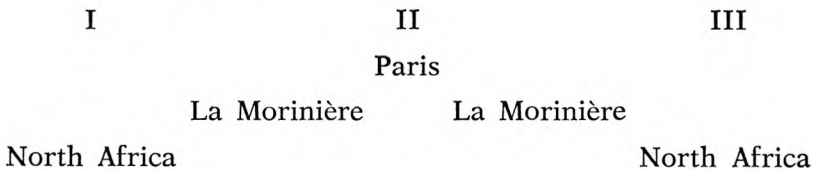
What has not been pointed out, however, is just how clearly the development of Michel's story calls into question the traditional basis of the narrative process itself, the conditions and limitations — and even the temptations — faced by anyone who undertakes to recount from hindsight his own experiences. A close look at the structure of Michel's account, and in particular the way it evolves to reflect the shifting temporal relationship between the past of events narrated and the present of their narration, provides insight not only into his own self-interested motives, but also into the very rhetoric of first-person narration.

Michel's story is framed in a rather standard way: after a period of three years during which he has not seen his three close friends, he calls them to his side, according to the terms of a pact to which all had subscribed as schoolmates, and in the course of one evening he tells them what has happened since they last saw him at his wedding. One of the three listeners, having apparently (if implausibly) transcribed Michel's account, addresses it, along with his own ambivalent reactions, to his brother, and it is this transcription that we read as the core of the novel.

Michel's story itself is an eventful one. The marriage to Marceline, one autumn, is followed by an extended trip to North Africa, in the course of which Michel falls seriously ill. Through Marceline's care and his own fierce determination to live, he not only recovers, but experiences something of a rebirth, a new awakening to the sensual side of life. The following spring, Michel's recuperation complete, the couple decides to pass the coming summer and autumn at La Morinière, his property in Normandy, where he can finish preparations for a course on the last years of the Gothic Empire that he is to give at the Collège de France. The summer and fall at La Morinière form a period of contentment and stability, as Michel, supervising the working of the property, pursues a balance between the "fecundity of nature and the wise effort of man to regulate it" (p. 61) and formulates a corresponding code of personal ethics "which should institute the scientific and perfect utilization of a man's self by a controlling intelligence" (p. 61). At the same time, however, he acknowledges a growing admiration for the "rude ethics of the Goths" (p. 71), an admiration that surfaces in the course he gives in Paris during the winter. It is at Paris as well that he comes to have a series of philosophical

discussions with an old acquaintance, Ménéalque, who espouses a Nietzschean ethic of the strong, an ethic to which Michel himself is already inclined. While Michel is spending a night in such discussion with Ménéalque, Marceline loses the child she was carrying and falls ill herself. In the spring, they move back to La Morinière, but Michel, instead of cultivating the property, now spends the summer and autumn roaming with poachers of his own game whose “Gothic” nature he clearly admires, and finally puts the farm up for sale. He then takes Marceline on a hectic trip, through Switzerland and Italy, back to North Africa, in what he wants to believe is an effort to restore her health. She finally dies the following spring — from the illness, from the rigors of the trip, and from Michel’s brutal attitude — and he remains a pathetic, spiritless man, appealing to his friends to help him pull together the pieces of his life and make a new start.

The symmetrical movement of the story — from North Africa to La Morinière to Paris to La Morinière and back to North Africa — is reinforced by the formal structure of the narration. Michel’s account is divided into three parts: the first, broken into nine chapters, recounts the initial trip to Africa; the second is composed of three chapters which relate respectively the periods spent at La Morinière, Paris, and again La Morinière; the third part, not divided into chapters — which is of some significance, as we shall see — recounts the return trip to North Africa. The result is what critics commonly cite as the ternary division of the work into an ascent, a levelling-off or plateau, and a fall, which can be represented this way:



Just how to reconcile the general symmetry of this formal structure with the fact that Michel is supposed to tell his story orally and at a single sitting is an interesting question. Actually, it is difficult not to attribute the division into parts and chapters to the implied author or to Gide himself (depending on the frame of reference chosen), unless one grasps at the unlikely possibility

that they are introduced by the listener who sends the story on to his brother. The real significance of the formal structure continues to be debated by critics. Albert Sonnenfeld sees “the fearful symmetry of *L’Immoraliste*” undermining the verisimilitude of the novel itself and argues that “Michel’s uninterrupted and excessively symmetrical narrative, while admirable in its perfection of composition, does not come to grips with the problematic of creation and reading . . .”<sup>3</sup> For Allan H. Pasco, the “excessively rigorous composition” indicates instead the unreliability of the narrator: “Because one can scarcely fail to perceive the artificially rigid structure of Michel’s story and to note the discrepancy between it and his pretensions to simplicity, the structure becomes an ironic device for betraying the untrustworthiness of this most unreliable narrator.”<sup>4</sup> Pasco’s contentions have been countered by Laurence M. Porter, who maintains that the glaringly obvious structure of the work is to be attributed, not to the narrator, but to the implied author, and that it serves to highlight, not conscious deception on the part of Michel, but rather motives (and a resulting “destiny”) of which Michel himself is not entirely aware: “the structural ordering principles of the *récit*,” argues Porter, “express the inexorable logic of unconscious drives rather than Michel’s defensive creation of a simulated fatality which can be blamed for his misdoings.”<sup>5</sup>

While these critical approaches are all well argued, they share the common limitation of considering formal structure only in an “architectural” sense, independent of the temporality inherent in Michel’s narration — and in the reader’s experience of that narration. Such arguments provide a synchronic overview (or “picture,” as in the diagram above) that may be quite helpful in grasping the general form of the work once it has been read, but they do not take sufficiently into account the fact that narration and reading are essentially diachronic in nature, unfolding progressively in time. In fact, when we examine more closely the way Michel’s narration actually develops, we find important indications that it is *not* as symmetrical as has often been claimed.

In order to appreciate not only what we come to reconstruct from retrospect as the novel’s formal structure, but the gradual development of the narration itself, we should begin by looking closely at the temporal relationships set up in Michel’s story. He

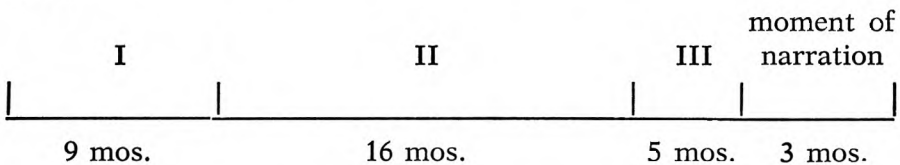
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tells his story on what must be July 18th or thereabouts, since the listener's letter to his brother, dated July 30th, states that they have been with Michel for twelve days (p. 3) and that Michel related his story the night of their arrival (pp. 5-6). Although both the listener (p. 4) and Michel himself (p. 7) mention three years as the period of time since the wedding, it would seem that the marriage must have taken place in October, not July, for the couple leaves directly for the trip and arrives in Tunis the last day of October (p. 13). The events of Michel's story take place, then, over some thirty-three months of fictional time.

Within this span of fictional time, the events recounted in Part I (the first trip to Africa) occupy nine months, the couple returning to France to settle down at La Morinière "in the first days of July" (p. 59). The events of Part II run over a period of about sixteen months, from that July to what must be early November over a year later, for when the following mid-January is eventually mentioned in Part III, Michel and Marceline have already been in Switzerland for two months (p. 126), at the start of the return trip to North Africa. The fictional time represented in Part III then runs from that November to Marceline's death in April (p. 136), an event separated in turn from the moment of Michel's narration by "barely three months" (p. 143).

This span of fictional time, with the division into parts in the formal structure, can be represented quite simply (to scale, in this case):



One might argue at this point that the periods of fictional time comprising Michel's story still form a roughly symmetrical pattern — the two trips framing the longer period of La Morinière and Paris — but the very perception of that pattern depends once again on one's perspective. While the symmetry may seem apparent from a detached point of view — that normally assumed by the omniscient narrator of a third-person novel, for example, and repre-

sented by the eye of anyone looking down at the time line above — it may not be obvious at all to the first-person narrator whose viewpoint is anchored in a particular moment of fictional time and hence quite limited. Michel, obliged to look “back along” that time line, as it were, rather than down on it, can hardly share the synchronic perspective enjoyed by the detached observer.

What makes Michel’s narration particularly interesting, in fact, is the shrinking interval between the fictional time of the events he relates and his own moment of narration. More than two years have elapsed since his own illness and recovery, for example, while barely three months separate him from the death of Marceline. In spite of his assertion that “Those three months have put a distance of ten years between that time and this” (p. 143), one would expect his narration to reflect quite a difference in effect between the events of such a recent period and those of a much earlier one. In short, the events of Parts I and III, which might seem to the privileged observer to fall into such a neat pattern, are likely to be far from “symmetrical” in their impact upon Michel.

Theoretically speaking, a shifting interval between time of events and the moment at which they are related would seem to affect the resulting narration in two different ways. The longer the interval, on the one hand, the less the narrator should be able to recall of the past; intervening time should act as a filter, screening out unexceptional incidents and leaving only the more striking events around which to build a story. On the other hand, an increased interval should allow the narrator to reflect upon his past experiences with more detachment and perspective, to see himself more objectively, and to evaluate his actions in a more disinterested manner. Should the resulting image prove too distasteful, however, it may well prompt the narrator to arrange his version of events with a view to presenting himself to listener or reader in a better light. While a longer interval between past and present would seem to favor a narrator’s lucidity, then, it does not necessarily assure his sincerity or credibility.

In the case of *The Immoralist*, Parts I and III — for all of their apparent symmetry — reflect quite clearly the effects of such a shrinking interval between the narrator’s past and his present. Michel himself acknowledges at several points the varying degree of control he exercises over his story. In Part I, for example, he



notes his careful reflection on early developments: "I think, when I come to reflect on it today, that, in addition to my illness, I was suffering from a general nervous derangement" (p. 27). He also admits at times, if only in passing, that he has consciously ordered this part of his account: "I am going to speak at length of my body. I shall speak of it so much you will think at first I have forgotten my soul. This omission, as I tell you my story, is intentional; out there, it was a fact" (p. 26), or again, quite simply: "I shall not speak of every stage of the journey" (p. 41). These early comments are certainly innocuous enough; there is little to suggest at this stage that the ordering of the story reflects Michel's desire to sway the reader's interpretation of events. The one remark in the first part that may make the attentive reader uneasy is Michel's admission that he has embellished his account of certain thoughts reported from the early days of his recovery: "I did not think all this at the time, and my description gives a false idea of me. In reality, I did not think at all . . ." (p. 44). But the most revealing indications of just how carefully Michel has organized the first part of his story come only much later and indirectly, in Part III, when he seems no longer able to make the necessary effort: "It would be useless for me to try at present to impose on my story more order than there was in my life. Long enough I've sought to tell you how I became who I am. Ah, to rid my mind of this unbearable logic! I feel nothing in me that isn't noble."<sup>6</sup> This brusque revelation is echoed by a second, a few pages later: "Oh, here I might deceive you or be silent — but what use can this story be to me if it ceases to be truthful?" (p. 141). These "explosions" of pent-up feelings, amounting to indirect admissions that Michel *has* carefully ordered portions of his story, should make the reader wonder at that point if he has accepted too naively or too unquestioningly the narrator's version of earlier events.

If these last comments seem to mark a point in his story where Michel's conscious control gives way rather suddenly to impulsive feelings, that process is actually much more gradual and subtle, and much more difficult to plot in exact terms. It is nevertheless apparent that Part I, by its general composition and tone, is in fact more controlled and ordered than Part III. Part I is marked, for instance, by numerous cases of foretelling, where the narrator, from his present vantage point, offers the listener or reader momentary

insights into developments yet to be related: "The excessive tranquillity of the life I led weakened, while at the same time it protected, me. Marceline, on the contrary, seemed strong — that she was stronger than I we were very soon to learn" (p. 10); "I read Christ's words to Peter — those words, alas, which I was never to forget . . ." (p. 40); "I passed by the beautiful temple of Paestum, in which Greece still breathes, and where, two years later, I went to worship some God or other — I no longer know which" (pp. 44-45); and especially Michel's ominous comment at the close of that opening part: "What would there be in a story of happiness? Only what prepares it, only what destroys it can be told. I have now told you what prepared it" (p. 57). This kind of foretelling, prevalent only in Part I, signals the narrator's conscious manipulation of the portion of his story covering events that took place more than two years earlier.

The detached perspective enjoyed by Michel on those early events is also discernible, if not quite so visible at first sight, in any number of passages of Part I where the narration of events or feelings from the past is "overlaid," as it were, with parenthetical comments or phrases that come from his present state of mind. A good composite example of this subtle interplay of temporal levels is the final paragraph of Chapter 8, where Michel conveys in general terms his attitude towards Marceline during the later stages of his recuperation:

For the time being, therefore, my relationship with Marceline remained the same, though it was every day getting more intense by reason of my growing love. My dissimulation (if that expression can be applied to the need I felt of protecting my thoughts from her judgment), my very dissimulation increased that love. I mean that it kept me incessantly occupied with Marceline. At first, perhaps, this necessity for falsehood cost me a little effort; but I soon came to understand that the things that are reputed worst (lying, to mention only one) are only difficult to do as long as one has never done them; but that they become — and very quickly too — easy, pleasant and agreeable to do over again, and soon even natural. So then, as is always the case when one overcomes an initial disgust, I ended by taking pleasure in my dissimulation itself, by protracting it, as if it afforded opportunity for the play of my undiscovered faculties. And every day my life grew richer and fuller, as I advanced toward a riper, more delicious happiness (p. 50).

This passage might actually be considered characteristic of any first-person narration in which enough time has elapsed between events and the moment of their narration to allow the narrator to reflect upon them and order his account accordingly; were it not for the particular details mentioned, the passage might just as well be from *Adolphe* or *The Fall*. The token expression of concession (“perhaps”), the efforts to downplay the importance of certain key words (“if that expression can be applied . . .” or “I mean that . . .”), the suggestion that individual actions are in fact only typical of general patterns of human behavior (“as is always the case . . .”) and therefore excusable — all are quite characteristic of the narration of someone who has clearly reflected in advance on what he has to say, has considered the potential impact on listener or reader, and who then makes subtle efforts to soften that impact or at least present himself in a more favorable light than the facts themselves would otherwise suggest. What makes this passage particularly interesting in the present context is the preoccupation with perversion of the truth — “dissimulation,” “falsehood,” “lying” — and the possibility that Michel, having overcome long ago the “initial disgust” to which he refers and ended up “taking pleasure” in “dissimulation itself,” is now enjoying that same pleasure at the reader’s expense.

Another subtle but real measure of the way the diminishing temporal lag between past and present is reflected in the narrator’s gradual loss of control over his story is the shifting tone of Michel’s frequent allusions to his listeners. From start to finish he is aware of their presence, naturally enough, and conscious of their possible reaction to his narration. His references to them in Part I tend to be stylized or rhetorical (and in that respect, once again, similar in tone to those of Clamence in the early portions of *The Fall*): “I will confess my folly” (p. 13); “Shall I confess that I felt not the least shock?” (p. 17); “Must I confess that so far I had paid very little attention to Marceline’s religious beliefs?” (p. 25); “But must I confess that what made me most uncomfortable was not the children’s presence — it was Marceline’s” (p. 28); “I will tell you, however, about one other action of mine, though perhaps you will consider it ridiculous . . .” (p. 48); “But shall I confess that the figure of the young king Athalaric was what attracted me most?” (p. 55). The formal tone of these expressions (conveyed in

particular by the rather affected inversion, *avoueraï-je*, in French) indicates the polished nature of Michel's narration of these early events from which he is now quite detached. He does not really engage the participation of his listeners by such remarks, he simply acknowledges in a rhetorical manner their presence and possible reaction.

In Part III, by contrast, his references to the friends are quite different in tone: "And Marceline, I tell you, began forthwith to recover hope" (p. 121); "Yes, I tell you, I cared for her tenderly" (p. 129); <sup>7</sup> "Oh, perhaps you will think I did not love Marceline. I swear I loved her passionately" (p. 129); "It is not, believe me, that I am tired of my crime—if you choose to call it that . . ." (p. 145). Michel clearly feels compelled in instances such as these to defend himself against the anticipated reaction of his listeners, and his appeals to them, personal and emotional now, reflect his defensive posture in this part of his narration. It is true that he has reason indeed to feel much more vulnerable in relating this part of the story, but beyond that, it also seems that he simply lacks the temporal perspective necessary to bring the end of his narration to the same point of refinement and polish evident in the first part. One suspects—quite hypothetically, to be sure—that if Michel were more removed in time from the events at the end of his story, his narration of them would be much smoother, much more detached in tone, than it is in fact in its present state.

If Michel's diminishing control over his narration can be traced in a number of rather subtle ways, it is no doubt most obvious in the ease or difficulty with which he actually recalls the past. To judge from his narration, he remembers the earlier events of his story more clearly than the recent ones. He himself seems to suggest that the loss of the baby (related towards the end of the second chapter of Part II) is the decisive point in this respect: "My recollections here are lost in dark confusion," he remarks, and then adds two paragraphs later, "My memory of this time is blurred; I have forgotten how the weeks passed" (p. 98). He confirms this trend—his memory of recent events being the least sure—near the end of his story: "It is this last part of the journey, though it is still so near me, that I remember least" (p. 139).

While Michel's conscious recall of events seems to diminish as his narration progresses, his retention of sensations or impressions

appears to follow just the opposite course (which is not entirely surprising, given his reawakening to the primitive, sensual side of life recounted in Part I). The ease with which he calls up particular impressions, already apparent in the latter chapters of Part I, is confirmed indirectly in the first chapter of Part II by his *inability* to say much about that stable time of his life: "If no distinct memory of this period of my life stands out for me, it is not because I am less deeply grateful for it — but because everything in it melted and mingled into a state of changeless ease, in which evening joined morning without a break, in which day passed into day without a surprise" (p. 60). His narration of the return trip to North Africa, on the other hand, is filled with impressions that have lost none of their immediacy. Early in Part III, for example, he notes: "I remember every sensation of that journey as vividly as if they had been events," and he elaborates a few lines later: "I remember it all, hour by hour; I remember the strange, inclement feeling of the air; the sound of the horses' bells; my hunger; the midday halt at the inn; the raw egg that I broke into my soup; the brown bread and the sour wine that was so cold" (p. 122). In fact, he later claims to be absolutely haunted by the memory of certain sensations, such as those of the two months spent (so impatiently, on his part) in Switzerland: "And yet now, when in my idleness the detested past once more asserts its strength, those are the very memories that haunt me. Swift sledge drives; joy of the dry and stinging air, spattering of the snow, appetite; walks in the baffling fog, curious sonority of voices, abrupt appearance of objects . . ." (p. 126). In this last example, the impressionistic notation, without verbs, effectively erases the distinction between the past of events related and the present of their narration.

The immediacy with which Michel calls up from the past certain sensory experiences is further underlined by their narration in the *present* tense, an effect that has received less attention than one would expect from critics (and which, even more surprisingly, has often been simply ignored — or "corrected"? — by translators). From very early in his story, Michel slips briefly into the present tense to relate certain moments of a particularly striking nature. In recounting how he began to spit up blood during a coach ride on the first trip, for example, he recreates a few isolated lines of

monologue without setting them off as such from the rest of his narration in the past:

My handkerchief was very soon used up. My fingers were covered with it. Should I wake up Marceline? . . . Fortunately I thought of a large silk foulard she was wearing tucked into her belt . . . Then, there suddenly came over me a feeling of extreme weakness; everything began to spin round and I thought I was going to faint. Should I wake her up? . . . No, shame! . . . My first thought was to hide the blood from Marceline. But how? I was covered with it; it seemed to be everywhere; on my fingers especially . . . My nose might perhaps have been bleeding . . . That's it! If she asks me, I shall say my nose has been bleeding . . . (pp. 15-16).

What he can recall of his fight for life is also introduced in the present: "I see again only Marceline, my wife, my life, bending over the bed where I lay agonizing" (p. 19).<sup>8</sup> The sketchy memories of the initial stages of his recuperation are likewise given in the present: "Marceline sits beside me. She is reading, or sewing, or writing. I am doing nothing — just looking at her. O Marceline! Marceline! . . . I look. I see the sun; I see the shadow; I see the line of shadow moving; I have so little to think of that I watch it. I am still very weak; my breathing is very bad; everything tires me — even reading; besides, what should I read? Existing is occupation enough" (p. 20). Michel then goes on to use the present tense sporadically through the rest of Part I, recreating scenes that apparently remain vivid for him, such as the visit of the Arab boy, Bachir (pp. 20-21), descriptions of the garden outside his terrace (p. 28) and of the oasis beyond (pp. 33-34), and a few lines from the altercation with the drunken coachman (p. 52).<sup>9</sup>

From the end of the second chapter of Part II on, however, Michel uses the present tense with increasing frequency, as Martine Maisani-Léonard has pointed out,<sup>10</sup> until it comes to dominate his narration. The critical point in this respect seems once again to be the loss of the baby; it is at that moment in Michel's story that conscious and orderly recall of events gives way more and more to direct re-living of the past.<sup>11</sup> A first notation on the initial period of Marceline's convalescence — "I see myself again leaning over her . . ." <sup>12</sup> — echoes a passage seen earlier (p. 19) and underlines the reversal of roles that has taken place. Michel then recreates at the

end of that chapter the entire scene where his wife asks for her rosary: "It's one morning, shortly after the embolism; I'm right by Marceline; she seems to be a little better . . ." <sup>13</sup> Disdainful of her weakness in seeking God's help while he got well alone," he rushes out of the room and the chapter ends on his incredibly cruel observation that disease had "stained" Marceline: "she was a thing that had been spoiled" (p. 100). While much of the third chapter of Part II is recounted once more in the past tense, Michel slips into the present again to relate, or re-live, the scenes of poaching that make up the last quarter of the chapter (scenes that neither translation conveys in the present tense).

The initial events of Part III are recounted in the past tense, as if Michel were making a final effort to keep past and present separate and to bring his story once more under control. Although there are periodic notations in the present tense (pp. 122-23, 126-27, 129-30 — the last not rendered in the present by either translation, however), the past tense prevails for more than half of Part III, until Michel, in the middle of a paragraph, slips definitively into the present: "We left Syracuse at last. I was haunted by the desire and the memory of the past. At sea, Marceline's health improved . . . I see again the color of the sea. It is so calm that the ship's track in it seems permanent. I can still hear the noises of dripping and dropping water — liquid noises; the swabbing of the deck and the slapping of the sailors' bare feet on the boards. I see again Malta shining white in the sun — the approach to Tunis . . . How changed I am!" (pp. 134-35). <sup>14</sup> The rest of Michel's story is told in the present, with only an occasional vestige of the narrative past tense used originally. <sup>15</sup>

What makes this definitive shift to the present all the more significant is that it is followed at once by Michel's admission, noted earlier, that he is henceforth abandoning the effort to impose more order on his story than there was in his life. What has been up to this point an occasional recreation in the present tense of experiences from earlier parts of his story (experiences further in Michel's past, more removed from his moment of narration) now becomes a general surrender to the dramatized re-living of the very recent past: "Biskra! That then is my goal . . . Yes; here are the public gardens; the bench . . . I recognize the bench on which I used to sit in the first days of my convalescence. What was it I read

there? . . . Homer; I have not opened the book since. Here's the tree with the curious bark I got up to go and feel. How weak I was then! Look! here are some children! . . . No; I recognize none of them. How grave Marceline is! She is as changed as I. Why does she cough so in this fine weather? Here's the hotel! Here are our rooms, our terrace!" (p. 136).<sup>16</sup>

It seems clear that the movement from the detached tone and well-ordered format of Part I to this kind of direct re-experiencing of recent events can in fact be tied to the shrinking interval separating Michel's moment of narration from his past.<sup>17</sup> Whereas he could look back on the developments related in Part I from a comfortable perspective of more than two years, he must deal in Part III with a past that is still very fresh; when he finally slips once and for all into the present tense, he is, after all, relating events that are only some four months past, events recent enough to interfere with his efforts to mold them into the finished format of a traditional narration. In spite of his assertion that the three months since Marceline's death have seemed like ten years, that interval is obviously too short to allow him to treat the final incidents of his story with the same degree of detachment he shows in narrating his earlier experiences.

It is this same general movement from well-structured narrative to direct re-living of the recent past that underlines the increasing *reliability* of Michel as narrator. The very contrast in tone and composition between Parts I and III should be enough to make the reader wonder if the polished format of the first part does not in fact betray the rhetorical slant of discourse emphasized by Benveniste. But if that does not prompt the reader to reconsider his reaction to earlier portions of Michel's narration, the re-creation of later events should certainly do so. For in re-living scenes such as the return to Biskra, Michel lays bare his insensitivity to Marceline's worsening health and invites the blame he clearly deserves for not calling a halt to the exhausting ordeal of the trip to which he impetuously and selfishly subjects his wife. In that sense, Michel's gradual surrender to an unstructured re-creation of scenes in the present tense strips away the smooth veneer of his earlier narration and reveals the real Michel; in the final analysis, it is only in the latter stages of his story that he fulfills his early promise to tell his life "simply."



More generally speaking, what might be called the “deterioration” of Michel’s narration has turned out to be a remarkable preview of the course followed by much of first-person fiction in the twentieth century. Part I of his account remains essentially faithful to the formula of the short memoir-novel, such as *Manon Lescaut* or *Adolphe*, in which enough time separates the past of the story from the present of narration to insure that the two do not interfere with each other. Because narrator and character are one and the same, there are of course emotional ties between the two levels, yet the lapse of time allows a narrator like Michel to look back and see himself almost as someone else. Moreover, the retrospective viewpoint itself tends to lend a definitive, even fatalistic, quality to the story; events that were originally experienced as unrelated are selected and seen from hindsight as steps in an inexorable progression towards an outcome that seems inevitable simply because it is already known. The resulting order of the story and the predominance of the narrative past tense then create, in a narrative like the first part of *The Immoralist*, something analogous to what Roland Barthes has termed, in the context of the third-person novel, the “euphoria” of traditional narration,<sup>18</sup> the creation of a fictional world where events seem frozen in time, fixed once and for all in a past that is cut off definitively from the present of narration.

In Part III, however, where the interval between Michel’s past and his present is drastically reduced, the stability of this world of fiction begins to break down, as it does in so many modern novels. In that respect, *The Immoralist*, like Gide’s *The Pastoral Symphony* in a diary format, subtly calls into question the very conception of the traditional first-person novel. Both illustrate initially, and then undermine progressively, the privileged status of a narrator reviewing events from a comfortable hindsight and presenting an account of them that is inevitably more structured — and thereby more reassuring, no doubt, to reader as well as narrator — than his original experience could possibly have been. While there are, to be sure, later first-person novels which continue to observe the convention of a past that can be re-created virtually intact and held up as authentic in its own right — *Remembrance of Things Past* is a notable example — more often the past is presented as fragmented, incomplete, at least partially irretrievable or

“lost,” and almost always as a function of the narrator’s ongoing present. Michel’s narration is in that sense a sign of things to come, a very early and indirect forerunner of works such as *Nausea*, where Roquentin arrives at the conclusion that any re-creation of the past — and storytelling in particular — is indeed artificial, or Claude Simon’s *The Flanders Road*, in which the past is depicted as an unstable, evanescent image of a memory in action, or Butor’s *Passing Time*, which amounts to a systematic demonstration that the past can never be recaptured at all, in large part because the present will not “stand still” long enough to permit it.

In undermining the story as it is traditionally conceived, the progressive deterioration of Michel’s narration also highlights the inherent temporality of the narrative process itself, the simple fact that it takes time to tell a story. In the traditional first-person account, the narration is in a certain sense atemporal, situated outside the normal flux of time. Nothing happens, for example, during the hours it must take Des Grieux or Adolphe to relate their experiences — or the much longer period necessary in the case of Proust’s narrator — to affect the story as it is originally projected; between the moment the story is begun and the moment it is completed, the present of narration plays no active role and has, for all practical purposes, no duration of its own.<sup>19</sup> In the modern first-person novel, by contrast, the real duration of the storytelling process, made visible in *The Immoralist* by the gradual breakdown of Michel’s narration, has come to be of central concern. This interest no doubt explains in part the renewed popularity of the diary or journal form in the twentieth century, for the journal-novel is by nature a narration drawn out over time, where the narrator’s original purpose in keeping a diary is subject to changes that may take place even as he writes. In novels as different in many respects as *The Pastoral Symphony*, Mauriac’s *The Knot of Vipers*, *Nausea*, and *Passing Time*, the narrator’s original intention to note, review, and understand certain experiences is deflected or even completely thwarted by developments (including the re-reading itself of earlier entries) that arise during the course of his narration. *The Immoralist* would seem to represent, in that sense as well, one of the first steps towards denying the narrator his privileged, artificial status and recognizing instead the fundamental temporality of narration.

From our vantage point today, then, *The Immoralist* not only belongs very clearly to our century, but provides an excellent point of reference from which to view the developments of an entire line of short first-person novels in France. By its temporal structure, it is — like *The Pastoral Symphony*, again — a hybrid work, the first part faithful to the traditional narration of earlier centuries, the third part a preview of much later novels. If the first part looks back, so to speak, to the reassuring world of conventional storytelling, where events seem securely classified and ordered in a fictional world no longer subject to change, the third part looks forward to the unsettled (and often unsettling) world of the contemporary novel, where the emphasis on the present of narration is designed to reflect the unorganized quality of life as it is lived. *The Immoralist* is, in short, a remarkable image of the evolution of a long line of fiction, of the distance, and yet underlying continuity, between such disparate works as *Manon Lescaut* and *Passing Time*.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 242 (“toute énonciation supposant un locuteur et un auditeur, et chez le premier l’intention d’influencer l’autre en quelque manière”).

<sup>2</sup> André Gide, *The Immoralist*, trans. Dorothy Bussy (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), p. 7. References throughout are to this edition, which is generally more faithful to the original than the more recent translation by Richard Howard (New York: Knopf, 1970). In certain cases, as noted, I have modified Bussy’s translation in order to come closer to the original.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Sonnenfeld, “On Readers and Reading in *La Porte étroite* and *L’Immoraliste*,” *Romanic Review*, 67 (1976), pp. 172, 182.

<sup>4</sup> Allan H. Pasco, “Irony and Art in *L’Immoraliste*,” *Romanic Review*, 64 (1973), pp. 186, 187.

<sup>5</sup> Laurence M. Porter, “The Generativity Crisis of Gide’s *Immoraliste*,” *French Forum*, 2 (1977), 66. Porter makes the same point in another article, “Autobiography Versus Confessional Novel: Gide’s *L’Immoraliste* and *Si le grain ne meurt*,” *Symposium*, 30 (1976), pp. 152-53.

<sup>6</sup> My translation; Bussy’s rendering of this key passage is not as faithful to the original.

<sup>7</sup> “I tell you” is my translation of the original “vous dis-je”; Bussy’s translations (“as I tell you,” p. 121, and “I say,” p. 129) do not fully convey the defensive, argumentative tone of Michel’s remarks.

<sup>8</sup> “I see again only” is my translation of the original “Je revois seulement”; Bussy’s “I can only see,” while a smoother translation, does not convey the key idea of seeing *again*.

<sup>9</sup> Neither Bussy nor Howard translates the last passage in the present.

<sup>10</sup> *André Gide ou l'ironie de l'écriture* (Université de Montréal, 1976), p. 172. Porter's contention that Michel's use of the present is "episodic" ("Autobiography," 153-54) is inaccurate.

<sup>11</sup> Both Maisani-Léonard, p. 180, and Porter, "Generativity," p. 66, come to similar conclusions.

<sup>12</sup> "I see myself again" is my translation of "Je me revois," which Bussy renders simply as "I remember" (p. 98).

<sup>13</sup> My translation; Bussy translates this in the past tense (pp. 98-99).

<sup>14</sup> "I see again" is my translation of "Je revois," which Bussy renders as "I can still see." With few exceptions, Bussy is faithful to Michel's use of the present tense through the balance of his narration; Howard, on the other hand, transposes it into the past tense.

<sup>15</sup> Maisani-Léonard points out very well (pp. 161-66) how Michel comes to use the *passé composé*, with its implicit references to the present of narration, in passages where the present tense now forms the basis of his account.

<sup>16</sup> Bussy translates the initial verb in the past tense and the "voici" that recurs through the passage as "there are."

<sup>17</sup> Maisani-Léonard, while underlining Michel's increasing use of the present, does not relate it directly to the circumstances of his narration.

<sup>18</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris: Seuil, 1953), p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> Both Jean Pouillon, in "Les Règles du je," *Les Temps Modernes*, 12 (1957), p. 1592, and Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), p. 234, refer in passing to this convention of traditional narration.