

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN LAURE CONAN'S

Angéline de Montbrun

Rosmarin Heidenreich

THE CRITICAL STUDIES PUBLISHED ON *Angéline de Montbrun*, from the appearance of the novel in 1881, seem to reflect with some fidelity the development of literary criticism in Quebec. The earlier articles tend to be didactic, positivistic, and biographical, whereas in the more recent studies the focus is clearly ideological in interpretation (including those studies with a Freudian bias) and formalistic in analysis. Correspondingly, since 1881 *Angéline de Montbrun* has been variously viewed as the story of a "beautiful soul" and of its exemplary renunciation of life, as an account of the personal life of Félicité Angers, as the unconscious revelation of an Electra complex in the religious obsession of a young girl, as "un cas patent de masochisme moral,"¹ and even as an allegory of the situation in Quebec before and after the conquest.² In fairness to both the earlier and later critics, one ought to mention that many of the more recent publications refer freely to the biographical and historical background of the novel, and that some of the earlier studies anticipate the psychological and philosophical implications the novel bears for the modern reader.

Angéline de Montbrun was enthusiastically received when it first appeared, and it has continued to interest critics, mainly because of the possibilities of interpretation it offers in the light of modern psychology. The richness of its symbolism reveals itself to a great extent in the thematic structure of the novel, and these symbolic and thematic features, in turn, are themselves represented in the overall narrative structure. An analysis of the narrative modes (epistolary, third-person narration, and journal) and the sequence in which they occur may thus serve as a key to an interpretation.

One of the main criticisms of the novel has been based upon the fact that it uses three different narrative modes and thus lacks unity. In fact, these three types of narrative, and the sequence in which they are used, constitute the basic narrative strategy of the novel in that, first of all, they demonstrate by means of the features particular to them, the novel's internal development (one can hardly speak of a plot). Secondly, the absence of a narrator in the two main parts of the

novel, the epistolary and the journal, forces the reader to take over this function, and the author thus succeeds in obtaining a maximum of reader participation.

The narrative voice in a traditional novel usually determines relationships, recognizes motives, and, depending on whether the narrator is outside the novel or a character within it, serves to resolve inconsistencies, reliably evaluate characters, and so forth. In short, it is the narrator who lends the novel its cohesiveness. In novels where there is no narrator, it is the reader who must "organize" the text in such a way that it becomes meaningful, and the "unity" of a text consisting of a selection of letters, a brief narrative account and journal excerpts lies in the meaning it takes on as he does so. As we shall see, in *Angéline de Montbrun* the reader is forced to "re-organize" his text again and again, and the meaning it takes on for him changes accordingly.

It is, however, not only the combination of various narrative forms which, in *Angéline de Montbrun*, constitutes a deviation from the traditional novel. We find a number of features which represent significant deviations from the conventions attending all three narrative forms. The epistolary form, for example, usually used to effect a gradual revelation of events, characters and their relationships and to offer different points of view to the uninitiated reader, functions somewhat differently as Laure Conan uses it in *Angéline de Montbrun*. Most of the letters are exchanged between Maurice Darville, who is with Angéline and her father at Valriant, and his sister Mina, who, in turn, corresponds with Emma S., an intimate friend. Angéline, like her father, speaks in only two letters.

The basic external situation is stated in the very first letter from Maurice to Mina. Maurice is deeply in love with Angéline, and is about to ask her father for her hand in marriage. Except for the fact that the demand is made and granted, and that we learn, in a letter from Mina to Emma, that Mina is secretly in love with Charles de Montbrun, a fact the reader has deduced long before the explicit confession, nothing "happens" in this first part of the novel. Nor are the characters developed in the sense that they "grow" in any way in the first section. Maurice is a sensitive, artistic, romantic young man whose communicative talents are musical rather than verbal, and he has fallen in love with Angéline at first sight. His idolization of her seems in keeping with his romantic temperament, and indeed Angéline is described not only by Maurice but also by Mina and Charles de Montbrun in terms which apply to the ideal romantic heroine. She emerges as the image of purity and beauty, an innocent young girl with an almost excessive attachment to her father. Charles de Montbrun also represents an ideal in his way: he is the mature, experienced, wise, fatherly figure, restrained, pragmatic, yet with an enigmatic charm (shared by Angéline) which Mina calls "montbrunage."

As to varying points of view manifesting themselves in the letters, there is never any issue on which the characters essentially differ. Only in Mina's letters do we

detect a note which is somehow more intimate, which contains a part of herself not evident in her other letters. Thus the situation lacks drama: the reader never has any reason to doubt that Maurice will succeed in winning Angéline's hand. The characters, as we have seen, do not develop, and there is no element of surprise in any of the letters, unless we regard Mina's declared love for Charles de Montbrun as such.

IN VIEW OF THE READILY RECOGNIZABLE CLICHES presented in the letters, what is it that holds the attention of the reader, and what meaning does he give to these letters? Obviously, the writers of the various letters (i.e., the author behind them) must make some sort of selection as to what they choose to report to the addressees. It is this selection of scenes, incidents and character descriptions that the reader must somehow juxtapose and relate to one another. Since his information is not complete, his imagination is put to work to fill in the gaps, and it is this his own filling-in of the gaps, or, put more technically, the high degree of indeterminacy of the text, to which the reader responds.

In the reader's reception of the text, two factors external to the text operate. First of all, his experience of life will tell him that the world of the author's text he is reading is unreal, not of this world. Secondly, his familiarity with other texts which bear some relation to this text will come into play. In view of these two factors, he interprets and allegorizes and thus arrives at a "text," or a meaning of the text, which is different from, or goes beyond, the author's text.

In *Angéline de Montbrun* the romantic idyll presented by the text is sketched rather than precisely drawn. Like the characters who inhabit it, it is unmistakably paradigmatic in function, engaging the consciousness of the reader in calling forth all the associations available to him which fit this paradigm. Angéline, beautiful, charming, innocent, affectionate, and of good family, is loved by Maurice, who is handsome, talented, honourable, and of equally good family. Charles de Montbrun is an ideal father, a wise, noble and charitable man. Mina, who later joins this trio, has only charming faults: social sophistication and a certain amount of feminine frivolity.

The setting in which we find these four fortunate human beings is a secluded *manoir* overlooking the St. Lawrence. The garden surrounding the house is not geometrically laid out, but is a veritable "garden of Eden" in which the plants are allowed to grow as they will, and are cut back and tended only to the extent that they can be enjoyed all the more by the inhabitants of Valriant. A pond at the end of the garden, with Angéline's swan gliding over it, completes the idyll.

Valriant is repeatedly referred to as a "paradis terrestre." The reader's interpretation of the text depends not only on his recognition and acceptance that this is

so, but also on his response to it, i.e., to remain within the metaphor, it depends on whether he chooses to enter this paradise or not. As André Brochu has pointed out, what is recounted is not so much a story but a state; this state of beauty and innocence, this world of high moral ideals, full of a goodness to which evil has not yet become a necessary corollary may represent a "paradis terrestre," but it alludes, inevitably, to celestial paradise. Thus Valriant as it emerges in the first section of the novel, lies outside reality and becomes almost a mythical place. In its beauty and very irreality, it represents a place or rather a state of longing for the reader. This longing has to do with a sense of loss usually associated with childhood and youth, but it is also associated with the biblical significance of paradise.

The biblical parallel is abundantly clear, yet what we have before us is by no means a clear-cut allegorical pattern, though Angéline comes close to being an allegorical figure. She is the person most talked about in the letters, yet remains strangely vague and remote. Maurice emerges as a sort of *Werther*, whose heroic attributes are artistic rather than virile. Charles de Montbrun, perhaps because he is older, *does* communicate some sense of the presence of shadow in the "paradis terrestre" which is Valriant. There is reference to the death of his wife, to his former military career, and so forth. In short, he is the only character, really, who has a "past." His role as father of Angéline and "maître de céans" gives him an authority which invites allegorical interpretation.

The most "real" person is Mina Darville. As a sophisticated society belle, and by her implied resemblance to Mme de Repentigny, we have some idea of her physical appearance. She constitutes a sort of narrative centre for this part of the novel since she is the sender and recipient of most of the letters. Also, because of her physical distance from Valriant, she seems sufficiently detached from the situation there to represent a more or less reliable point of view. In Mina the author presents us with a character with whom we can identify. Her "seduction" by Valriant, when she arrives there, may be seen as coinciding with the reader's.

The first section of the novel ends with a letter from Mina to Maurice, a reversal of the opening letter, which was from Maurice to Mina. In a sense this last letter marks a final response to what is expressed in the first. The postscript, normally used to add something trivial or forgotten to an already finished letter, contains a reference, teasingly meant, to the state of marriage.

P.S.-Sais-tu que le mariage est le *doux reste* du *paradis terrestre*. C'est l'Eglise qui le dit dans la préface de la messe nuptiale. Médite cette parole liturgique et ne m'écris plus de lamentations.

There is thus an opposition between the postscript, added at the end, and its message, which expresses anticipation. This contradiction becomes ironic in view of the later events since the anticipation is not fulfilled. The "paradis terrestre" which

is prophesied for the future (in the marriage of Angéline and Maurice) actually lies behind them. They lose their paradise (represented by their life at Valriant) and both enter a very personal kind of hell. This postscript, then, in view of the subsequent development of the novel, represents the height of irony since, in retrospect, the reader will recognize, along with the characters, that at the time of the writing of that letter paradise was, in fact, about to be lost, not gained. The postscript marks the climax of the novel in that it designates the point of tragic reversal and functions as an ironic comment on it.

THE BRIEF PIECE OF THIRD-PERSON NARRATION in which the events leading to the tragedy are recounted — Charles de Montbrun's death, Angéline's fall, disfigurement and renunciation of marriage, and Mina's entering a convent — is dialectical in structure. On close reading, there seem to be not one but two narrative voices, one stating the objective facts, the other commenting or reflecting on them. The opening of this second part may be taken as an example. Voice One states: "L'été suivant, M. Darville revint au Canada." Voice Two reflects: "Le bonheur humain se compose de tant de pièces, a-t-on dit, qu'il en manque toujours quelques-uns . . .," etc. There is also a clear distinction between the voices made by the way they refer to the characters. Voice One, the formal or "objective" narrator, refers, for example, to "Mlle de Montbrun," "Mlle Darville," titles which strike the reader, to whom the heroine is "Angéline" and her friend is "Mina," as formal and remote, and as being spoken with a sense of distance to the person and events referred to.

Voice One reports a fact: "Dans l'hiver qui suivait la mort de M. de Montbrun, Mlle Darville entra au noviciat des Ursulines." Voice Two comments: "Angéline ne s'y opposa point, mais la séparation lui fut cruelle. Elle aimait la présence de cette chère amie, qui n'osait montrer toute sa douleur."

The significance of this dual narrative position lies in the fact that the one (Voice One) is solidly situated within historical reality, within the real world which seems so distant from and irrelevant to life at Valriant.³ Time, at Valriant, is cyclical, measured by the alternation of night and day, the seasons and the tides. This cyclical representation of time, or its non-existence, is an important aspect of Valriant as "paradise." The non-existence of time, which is conceived of as eternity, in the first part of the novel contrasts dramatically with the episodic time of the second. Charles de Montbrun cannot die at Valriant. His death, like Angéline's fall and disfigurement, must take place in a world outside it, and the second part of *Angéline de Montbrun*, with its completely different narrative mode, represents a completely different world from the first.

The bridge between the two parts is formed by the second narrative voice. The sympathetic commentator is, as it were, on intimate terms with the characters. He has known the "paradis terrestre," so to speak, and so becomes the voice of regret expressing its loss. In a way, this second voice anticipates Angéline's mourning as it echoes through the journal. It is a voice with which the reader, who, through Part I, has also known the "paradis terrestre," can readily identify.

As André Brochu has pointed out, this piece of narrative represents the "coup de pouce de l'auteur" which changes the novel from the representation of one state (happiness) to another (unhappiness). Its very brevity imitates the momentariness, the short duration of the incident which brings about the tragedy. This section of the novel has often been criticized for the lack of credibility of the chain of events set in motion by Charles de Montbrun's death. It seems to me, however, that the question of credibility does not apply here, since with Charles de Montbrun's death the novel becomes more and more self-consciously allegorical. Angéline's fall and disfigurement can certainly be taken as a fall from grace. Her renunciation of marriage and subsequent self-isolation may be seen as a gesture of atonement. What is missing, in this allegorical interpretation, is the nature of Angéline's "sin." It is around this problem that the journal itself revolves.

The reader, when he has finished reading these few pages of narration, is not so much incredulous as mystified. From here on, his participation in the text involves him, emotionally, in that he sympathizes with Angéline. But the reader's activity is bent on the search for the reason behind Angéline's self-imposed unhappiness, and the presumed unhappiness of Maurice and Mina. The question, too, is whether indeed it *is* self-imposed.

It is the journal which demands the most radical re-organization of the "reader's text" we have already referred to. For not only has life changed for Angéline. The entire world of the novel, created by the reader as well as by the author, and, figuratively speaking, dwelt in by them both, has also been transformed. Angéline, whom the reader knows only as an ideal or prototype of beauty and innocence, whom he has tended to view allegorically, suddenly stands in the foreground as a psychologically highly problematical figure. Through her journal, in which she reflects on her memories of people and events in her former life, we realize, suddenly, that she has been problematical all along. Confronted by the Angéline of the journal, the reader is forced to re-interpret much of the text of Part I. His ability to do so depends upon the effectiveness of what I will call "bracketing."

In reading the journal, with its constant references to the Valiant of the past, the reader calls to mind the corresponding scene as it has been revealed to him in a letter. Two contrasting versions of an event are now available to the reader, and he must re-interpret the entire text in terms of that contrast.

This ability to bracket is also significant for the interpretation of the text in that certain references, casually made in the first part and seemingly without con-

text, in retrospect reveal themselves as prophetic of the future, and the text therefore becomes charged with irony. The reader, then, brackets a fact if he remembers it at a designated, i.e., appropriate spot later on in the text. The richness of the text thus depends to a large extent on the reader's ability to bracket. The novel is full of such self-allusiveness, but a few examples may serve to illustrate the principle.

For example, Angéline's lightly made suggestion to "démondaniser" Mina is ironically prophetic. Mina's experience at Valriant indirectly causes her to "leave the world" by entering a convent. Maurice's singing, referred to in the first letter, takes on a new significance when it is associated with the scene at the pond, with the swan;⁴ with the reference, by Mina, in a comical context, to a song he sings, *sotto voce*:

Ah! gardez-vous de me guérir!
J'aime mon mal, j'en veux mourir;

and with Angéline's memories which she enters in her journal (for example, "Tantôt, j'entendais un passant fredonner :

Que le jour me dure,
Passé loin de toi!

C'est Maurice qui a popularisé par ici ce chant mélancolique auquel sa voix donnait un charme si pénétrant").

Another form of self-allusiveness is the presentation of former events, in the journal, which have not appeared in the letters. The absence of these events in the letters are perceived as significant gaps by the reader, who has shifted his point of view from that of the letters (i.e., primarily that of Mina) to Angéline's. A key episode is recorded by Angéline in her journal entry of August 4. She remembers a riding excursion she made with Maurice and her father. They had encountered a storm, and her horse had bolted. She had fallen, but was saved from serious mishap by Maurice's intervention. At a nearby cottage, where they seek shelter from the storm, she is offered dry clothes (of white and blue, the virginal colours she always wears), and is given a mirror to admire herself in.

Ma toilette finie, elle [la jeune fille] me présenta un petit miroir, et me demanda naïvement si je n'étais pas heureuse d'être si belle? — si j'aurais pu supporter le malheur d'être défigurée [par mon accident]?

This incident, like so many other flashbacks in the journal, ironically anticipates or foreshadows what will happen. Even more ironic is the conclusion of Angéline's description of the landscape, after the storm.

L'orage avait cessé. La campagne rafraîchie par la pluie resplendissait au soleil. La rosée scintillait sur chaque brin d'herbe, et pendait aux arbres en gouttes brillantes.

L'air, délicieux à respirer, nous apportait en bouffées la saine odeur des foins fauchés, et la senteur aromatique des arbres. Jamais la nature ne m'avait paru si belle. Debout à la fenêtre, je regardais émue, éblouie. Ce lointain immense et magnifique, où la mer éblouissante se confondait avec le ciel, m'apparaissait comme l'image de l'avenir.

This is a side of Angéline which Mina, in her letters, never reveals to the reader, nor, in fact, do any of the others, including Angéline herself. It seems that we get to know Angéline only in the journal. She reveals herself, or this side of her, only after it has ceased to exist. Thus these reflective flashbacks catch the reader, who has oriented himself mainly by Mina Darville in the first part, completely unaware. The narrative shift of focus seems highly significant, for the juxtaposition implies a superimposition, by the author, of the characters of the two women. Potentially "sisters" due to the anticipated sequence of events in Part I — Angéline marries Maurice, Mina marries Charles de Montbrun — the two become "sisters" in their mourning, in their renunciation of the world, in their self-imposed seclusion. Mina enters a convent (neither Angéline nor Maurice seems to have any inkling as to the real motive), and Angéline retreats to Valriant, which is now no longer the "paradis terrestre," but the "paradis perdu."

The two "states" we have referred to (happiness and unhappiness) as constituting, broadly speaking, the themes of the novel, are conceived of by the reader in temporal terms, in terms of a "before" and "after." This kind of conception coincides with Angéline's own in the journal. It is, however, only in terms of the events described in the direct narration that the terms "before" and "after" take on any meaning at Valriant. For the Valriant we experience after the events is as detached from reality as was the "paradis terrestre," and the same concept of timelessness applies to it. The "journal," therefore, if one takes the word literally, becomes an ironic comment on itself: the dates prefacing each entry are meaningless.

Symbolically, the most striking feature of Angéline's journal is the ambiguity of pronoun reference. In her musings over the past, often in the form of prayer, the pronoun "il" or "vous" is at times three ways ambiguous in that it could refer to her father, to Maurice or to God. Her mourning is thus not clearly associated with the death of her father, or her loss of Maurice, or her inability to love God, but is a state which derives in equal measure from all three. Her longing represents an undifferentiated longing for her father, for Maurice, for communion with the divine. Unconsciously, the three seem to have become fused into one for her, a unified trinity in which, however, her father still figures dominantly. She is unaware that she is not making a distinction, and her memories of the past show that she is still innocent in that she does not recognize guilt (the sin of idolization of her father, for example) as her motivating force. For the reader, Angéline's "sin" seems at first to lie in her repressed love, her repressed passion for her father, and

since these feelings are reciprocated, or rather originate with the father, it is really he who is "guilty" if one sees a psychologically incestuous relationship between the two.

If one searches more closely for a causality, the initial event leading to the "loss of paradise" is not Angéline's fall and disfigurement, nor her refusal to marry Maurice, but Charles de Montbrun's death. The implications, if we identify Charles de Montbrun's fatherly and authoritative role in the first part as an allegorical counterpart of the divine, are atheistic in the Nietzschean sense. The loss of "paradise," for Angéline, thus becomes strangely literal, and the death of her father, for which she can find no consolation by addressing God, has, in a sense, condemned her to the suffering she is experiencing.

Just as the epistolary form was appropriate to the sense of communion at Val-riant, where the letters represent the very sense of community expressed in them, the journal is the appropriate expression of an isolated, lonely individual: it is a form of self-dialogue. Reflective, with only one point of view, the journal reveals Angéline's progressive detachment from reality to the point where reality itself seems to coincide with her own preoccupations. This illusion is effected in a number of ways, and is one mode by which the allegorical level of the novel is sustained.

One example is the choice of names of the characters who are mentioned in the journal. As Angéline takes on more and more of a saintly resignation, as she becomes more and more associated with sacrifice and sisterly love, there occur occasional references to her mother, and in her prayers she turns more and more frequently to the Virgin. Correspondingly, there are at least three Mariés who occur in the journal, for all of whom Angéline feels a sisterly devotion and affection. The Indian girl, who has waited for her baptism to die, is christened "Angéline" by the missionary who performs the rite. Veronica Désileux, whose story represents, in miniature, the fate of Angéline in the novel, leaves Angéline a legacy, both literally and metaphorically. The feminine principle figures more and more prominently as a source of redemption and salvation.

This progressive fusing of the reality around Angéline with Angéline's state of mind is ambivalent in its effect. On the one hand, she is more and more at one with the world around her, more and more in harmony with it, a development signalled by the way she sees the sea (symbolically the source of all life, a mother image as well as an image of passion) and the sky (associated with the divine, the spiritual, the ideal) come together at the horizon. Both the sea and the sky are symbols of infinity, and so this apparent union seems final. On the other hand, this sense of oneness with the universe and with God for which she is striving has as its consequence her ceasing to be as an individual. What she is striving for, and progressively attaining, is a transcendent state behind which, however, is also concealed a death wish.

The tri-structural form, then, expresses a triadic conception of the universe as it is represented in the novel. This triadic principle applies to Angéline's perception of the universe (sea, sky and earth) as well as to the seasons (winter, as the season and symbol of death is "silent" and therefore cannot be expressed in the novel). The novel represents a progression from a state in which the *coeur* dominates to a predominance of *âme*. The body, the realm of the physical holding the two together, so to speak, is insignificant, and yet the cause, the origin of all that happens. Most obvious of all is the "trinity" constituted by Angéline's father, Maurice, and God.

As we have already suggested, there is also an epic progression, expressed in the three sections, which moves from the ideal ("paradise") to the real (the events which lead to the tragedy) to a third state which represents an attempt to regain the ideal. Even without the specific references to Dante, one can see in *Angéline de Montbrun* not only an inversion of the self-conscious allegorization of the *Divina Commedia*, but also an allusion to the *Vita Nuova*, which is also determined by this triadic principle.

It is in a Dante quotation, too, in terms of which the tragedy of Angéline might be summed up, a quotation in which one can also see this triadic principle at work. As Angéline and Maurice look out at the landscape, after the storm, Maurice smilingly quotes "dans cette belle langue italienne qu'il affectionait: 'Béatrice regardait le ciel, et moi je regardais Béatrice'."

NOTES

- ¹ Jacques Cotnam, "Angéline de Montbrun: un cas patent de masochisme moral," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 2, no. 3 (1972), 152-60.
- ² This interpretation, which is based on what seems to me to be merely an excursus in Angéline's journal entry of 25 September, is presented by André Brochu in a study entitled "La Technique romanesque dans *Angéline de Montbrun*," *L'Instance critique* (Montreal: Editions Leméac, 1974), pp. 112-20.
- ³ It is interesting that although temporal references are made in the first part of the novel, e.g., the engagement period of Angéline and Maurice is specified — such references are always associated with a reality *outside* Valriant. For example, during the engagement period Maurice goes to France.
- ⁴ The symbolic ambivalence of Maurice's singing at the pond with the swan seems obvious: the swan's song is an expression of a premonition of death. However, Maurice's song is an expression of longing for Angéline, who is, in this scene, closely associated with "her" swan. Gaston Bachelard, in *L'eau et Les Rêves* (Paris, 1942), observes about the swan as symbol: "Le cygne, en littérature, est un ersatz de la femme nue. C'est la nudité permise, c'est la blancheur immaculée et cependant ostensible. . . . Qui adore le cygne désire la baigneuse" (p. 50).