

My American Uncle, America Cries Uncle, and Other
Fantastic Tales from France: Iegor Gran's *Jeanne d'Arc
fait tic-tac*

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Dis-moi qui te hante, je te dirais qui tu es.¹

Tell me who haunts you and I'll tell you who
you are.

The first sentence of Iegor Gran's *Jeanne d'Arc fait tic-tac* (2005) introduces a contemporary novel that deliberately harks back to the oral tradition in which the genre originates: "Raconte-nous, onc' Guillaume, oh oui, raconte-nous donc" "Tell us a story, Uncle Guillaume, oh please, tell us a story" (9). In keeping with this immediate evocation of the sheer power and pleasure of narrative, I too would like to retreat to an earlier stage of literary criticism and instill potential readers of *Jeanne d'Arc* with the same breathless desire to hear Uncle Guillaume's stories as that repeatedly expressed by his impatient audience within the novel. Fortunately, Gran's voice is so distinctive and his textual strategies so thoroughly original in their own right that no amount of critical discussion risks diminishing, let alone replacing, the joy of the actual reading experience. So take the advice of Patrice Delbourg and buy three copies of *Jeanne d'Arc fait tic-tac* from the beginning: "l'un pour votre plaisir personnel, l'un pour votre meilleur ami, le dernier pour votre ennemi le plus cher" 'one for your personal pleasure, one for your best friend, the last for your worst enemy' (82). At the same time, of course, as Delbourg's paradoxical instructions imply, the reception of the novel is nowhere near as straightforward nor as transparent as its opening

sentence might lead us to believe. The self-referentiality already evident in the reflection of writer and reader within the primary narrative situation of the novel alerts us to a renewal of the oral tradition fully as intentional as its recollection.

Jeanne d'Arc fait tic-tac also updates a particular category of literature whose enduring popularity over the past twenty years has produced an eclectic group of works united only by their common attempt to understand French and Anglo-American cultures in a comparative context. Initially the provenance of historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and journalists and largely dominated by books written in English, regardless of the writer's nationality, such publications include, to cite only a few representative examples, Theodore Zeldin's *The French* (1983), Raymonde Carroll's *Evidences invisibles: Américains et Français au quotidien* (1987), Richard Bernstein's *Fragile Glory: A Portrait of France and the French* (1990), Richard F. Kuisel's *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (1991), Jean-Philippe Mathy's *Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America* (1993), Jean-Benoît Nadeau and Julie Barlow's *Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong* (2003), and, most recently, Bernard-Henri Lévy's *American Vertigo*, which appeared simultaneously in English and French in early 2006.² If the works cited so far no doubt still reflect the lasting influence of Alexis de Tocqueville, despite their tendency to focus more often on France than on the United States, the subsequent evolution of the form probably owes more to Peter Mayle's lighthearted and personal accounts of life in Provence. There have been an increasing number of memoirs, autobiographically inspired essays, and travel journals—Alice Kaplan's *French Lessons* (1993), Art Buchwald's *I'll Always Have Paris* (1996), Adam Gopnick's *Paris to the Moon* (2003), Edmund White's *Le Flâneur* (2003), Diane Johnson's *Into A Paris Quarter* (2005), among others—as well as so many Anglophone novels set in France that the three written by a single novelist—Johnson's *Le Divorce* (1997), *Le Mariage* (2000), and *L'Affaire* (2003)—serve admirably to exemplify the phenomenon as a whole (see Durham). Moreover, if the recent rise in Anglo-American Francophobia and French anti-Americanism, as a result of the war in Iraq, might have been expected to silence or at least sober cross-cultural commentators, to date it appears to have had virtually the opposite effect. Like such

earlier humorists as Harriet Welty Rochefort (*French Toast* [1999], *French Fried* [2001]) and David Sedaris (*Me Talk Pretty One Day* [2000]), Stephen Clarke (*A Year in the Merde* [2004], *Merde Actually* [2006]) and Ted Stanger (*Sacrés Français!* [2003], *Sacrés Américains!* [2004]), for example, take a frankly comic approach to French and Anglo-American relations.

As the texts listed above reveal, the United States and England have dominated contemporary cross-cultural studies both in the area of fiction in general and in that of satire in particular. Comparatively few French novels are either set in the United States and England or take these countries and their cultures as a central focus, let alone both. Philippe Labro's *L'Étudiant étranger* (1986), perhaps the best known of such novels, takes place in 1950s' America. One of its few recent successors, Catherine Hermary-Vieille and Michèle Sarde's *Le Salon de conversation* (1997), adopts a frankly pedagogical approach in keeping with its setting in a Texas branch of the Alliance Française; the writers' evident desire to foster an understanding and appreciation of Franco-American differences transforms an engaging novel of character into something closer to both a textbook and a manifesto for tolerance. In the service of the same theme of cultural adaptation, more openly comic French writers such as Pierre Daninos and Christine Kerdellant approach France as false outsiders through the creation of fictional Anglophone heroes. Not only are such novelists few and far between—almost forty years separate Major Thompson's notebooks (*Les Carnets de W. Marmaduke Thompson* [1959]) from Engineer Norton's e-mail correspondence (*Les Chroniques de l'Ingénieur Norton* [1997])—but the use of a narrative strategy directly parallel to that employed by the majority of their Anglophone counterparts results in a surprising degree of at least superficial resemblance. In this context, *Jeanne d'Arc fait tic-tac* marks the emergence of a very French, a very fresh, and a very funny new voice.³

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam suggest that “beliefs about nations often crystalize in the form of stories” in a proposal that could serve as both summary and generative matrix for *Jeanne d'Arc fait tic-tac* (101). “Enfance” ‘Childhood,’ the first section of Gran's two-part novel, consists of eleven stories told on separate occasions by Uncle Guillaume to the rapt *habitués* of the local café. Guillaume's

most enthusiastic fans consist of Jean-Ramsès, the first-person narrator of the novel, and his best friend Wolf, whose early adolescence determines the vague temporal framework of *Jeanne d'Arc*. The realistic setting of the café, eventually renamed “Le Coin de l’Oncle Guillaume” ‘Uncle Guillaume’s Place’ in honor of the *raconteur*’s spreading fame, and the everyday life of its patrons contrast with the strange events that occur within the stories themselves. The narrative framework is also punctuated by the ritual objections, to increasing dire consequences, of Guillaume’s nemesis, the incredulous Oncle Abe; and it is further interrupted by recurrent episodes in the ongoing saga of the boys’ first sexual adventures, financed at the neighborhood brothel by money stolen from Jean-Ramsès’s father. Oncle Guillaume’s stories, all of which illustrate the danger that American culture represents for French national identity, make the second part of the novel seem almost inevitable: in “Feu” ‘Fire,’ France declares war and invades the United States. Wolf’s exploits now take precedence over Jean-Ramsès’s, as a traditional third-person account of the war alternates with the letters the patriotic volunteer writes home to his parents from the battlefield. In one possible reading of the curious title of Gran’s novel, which combines the historical savior and popular symbol of France with the sound of ticking, French national pride is a time bomb whose periodic detonation temporarily repels foreign invaders. That defense turns to offense and forces the army to cross the ocean this time around is fully in keeping with the ironic reversals that characterize *Jeanne d'Arc fait tic-tac* throughout.

The first story told by Oncle Guillaume can serve the same function in this essay as it does within Gran’s novel, where “Les Nike” introduces many of the elements and themes that will recur in different forms in subsequent tales. The fact that of the eleven stories this one alone is already familiar to its audience, who explicitly clamors for “celle de la chaussure” ‘the one about the shoe’ (9), corresponds to the novelist’s self-conscious use of the *conte* as a strongly formalist genre whose dependence on variations of familiar motifs and patterns connects it at one and the same time to traditional children’s literature and to postmodern strategies of textual reproduction and intertextual citation (see, for example, Propp, Genette, and Todorov). Significantly, after the initial story

in the collection, literal repetition is perceived as a serious threat to the storyteller's reputation: "On fut confronté à un grave passage à vide. . . . Il lui arrivait aussi de manquer d'originalité et de nous servir pour la dixième fois une histoire que l'on connaissait par cœur" 'We went through a really bad period. . . . Originality also failed him at times and he served up a story we knew by heart for the tenth time' (129). Fortunately, *Oncle Guillaume's* "verve" is normally as inexhaustible as in his opening account of what happens when "un type" he once knew, a certain "p'tit Louis," succumbs one day to his obsessive desire to own a pair of Nikes. When his new shoes drag him into "un snack-bar" identified by "un grand M jaune, tirant vers le rouge" 'a big reddish-yellow M' and refuse to let him leave until he has not only ordered "un menu Best-Seller" but actually consumed "l'horrible boustifaille" 'the awful grub,' a cross-cultural battle of the wills is set in motion (12–15).

As is the case for *McDonald's*, this paradigmatic tale never actually names either the United States or France. Both the narrative that frames *Jeanne d'Arc fait tic-tac* and all of the stories contained within this framework take place in a country referred to only as "notre île" 'our island.' If the representation of France as an island state is clearly of symbolic importance, Gran also refers to an actual place so that a (con)fusion of the real and the metaphorical, one of the novel's most characteristic strategies, is created from the beginning. Although *Oncle Guillaume* describes the setting of all the stories he tells in specific detail, only the first includes unmistakable references to the geography of a particular city located nearby. P'tit Louis's daily promenades through the streets of Paris allow us to situate the novel as a whole within the space of *Ile-de-France*. (Familiar laments about the weather—"notre île n'a pas de climat, c'est son seul défaut" 'our island has only one drawback: its lousy climate' (84)—confirm our presence in this region of France.) The selection of a former province, which includes not only Paris but also the surrounding countryside whose beauty and abundance once made it the home of kings, acknowledges the significance of the capital in a highly centralized state; more importantly, however, in keeping with the village café itself, it allows an image of *la France profonde*, the mythical French heartland, everyone's beloved *terroir*, to stand in for the country as a whole. Ironically, France's

well-known social and political insularity and its equally renowned obsession with linguistic and cultural purity stem precisely from the fact that it is not really a protected island at all. On the contrary, the history of the country is one of repeated foreign invasions of which the incursion of the products and “modes de consommation” ‘means of consumption’ (16), which attempt to enslave p’tit Louis, is merely a contemporary variant. In transforming America, France’s evil twin, into “là-bas” ‘over there,’ Gran emphasizes both the actual and, especially, the figurative distance of the United States, defined by the fundamental difference of its values, totally opposed to those that flourish *ici* ‘here,’ on “notre île enchantée” ‘our enchanted island’ (16).⁴

In the face of an enemy presence on its own soil, France’s—at least Ile-de-France’s—historic response has been one of heroic resistance. When p’tit Louis’s new shoes prevent him from joining a “manif” ‘demonstration’ whose target is American cultural imperialism (“Spielberg, rentre chez ta mère” ‘Spielberg, go home to your mother’; “L’exception culturelle n’est pas un Big Mac” ‘Cultural exceptions don’t include Big Macs’), in what serves as the first of many microcosmic images and *mise-en-abymes* of both a particular story and the novel as a whole, he resolves to fight back (15). Appropriately, the fast food restaurant he struggles to avoid more and more successfully in the weeks to come is located in a square named for the most famous leader of the French Resistance; p’tit Louis can reach “la place Jean-Moulin” by following either “l’avenue de la Résistance” or “l’avenue de la République.” Similarly, his valiant fight against *la malbouffe* ‘junk food’ is surely meant to recall the protest against McDonald’s that turned José Bové into a modern French folk hero, the living equivalent of Astérix, whose valor is also invoked in *Jeanne d’Arc*’s first story.⁵ Indeed, if p’tit Louis doesn’t actually destroy property, he does attack the cursed snack-bar with graffiti. At the same time, however, this courageous act exposes the fatal flaw that designates p’tit Louis as a victim of American consumerism—worse, its enthusiastic *collaborator*—to begin with. In a country where native language and national identity are indissoluble and educational success essentially determines who will lead the nation, p’tit Louis turns out to be a bad speller, as Oncle Guillaume takes great care to point out: “Sur la porte vitrée,

il marque: 'Retourne laba!' Laba, en attaché et sans s à la fin. Et, sur la photo d'un hamburger, il ajoute: 'Imonde,' en oubliant un m car il n'a pas fait beaucoup d'études" 'On the glass door he writes: "GoHom!" GoHom, all one word and no e at the end. And on the picture of a hamburger, he adds: "disgusting," with two s's since he didn't get very far in school' (21). Indeed, Uncle Guillaume's final injunction to Wolf and Jean-Ramsès—"C'est important, l'orthographe" 'Spelling matters' (22)—clearly serves as the true moral of the story.

If p'tit Louis, by virtue of his age and his subsequent resistance, is ultimately cleared of his original collaboration with the enemy, things go less well for his Nike-owning counterpart within the frame story of *Jeanne d'Arc fait tic-tac*. To the astonishment of the other auditors and the outrage of the storyteller himself, Uncle Abe dares to challenge the truth and accuracy of a story everyone else views as objective fact. Although a name presumably intended to reflect Abe's general fascination with American culture also evokes a particular American of celebrated honesty, Gran's antagonist is repeatedly denounced as a liar and a traitor, and his interruptions always result in his expulsion from the café. This *épuration* 'purge,' a comic version of that more tragically practiced at the end of the Occupation of France, regularly requires a communal display of patriotism to restore peace. The ritual exorcism is performed in the café's "coin sacré" 'sacred corner,' where an eclectic collection of icons and relics and a map tracing the route of the annual pilgrimage honor the memory of the venerable "Tour de l'île": "Qu'on aimât le sport ou pas, il y avait dans cette épreuve mythique un peu de notre patrioimone génétique" 'Whether or not you were a sports fan, this mythical event contained a bit of our genetic inheritance' (13–14).

In keeping with the evident fact that Gran caricatures French chauvinism as much as he mocks American consumerism, the two ironically prove to be mutually dependent. Uncle Guillaume succeeds in banishing Uncle Abe only to discover that his own inspiration flags in the absence of provocation. P'tit Louis's experience is even more telling. The first story in *Jeanne d'Arc fait tic-tac* differs from the rest in that its hero actually triumphs—or at least initially appears to triumph—over the forces of "là-bas." He slowly gains physical and mental control over the shoes until he can even taunt

his adversary by parading up and down in front of the snack-bar before settling into the bistro across the street to order “une sardine-huile et une salade verte” ‘sardines in oil and a green salad’ (22). In the course of his long struggle, moreover, p’tit Louis greatly strengthens not only his calf muscles but his character as well, so that the former “mollasson” ‘good-for-nothing’ becomes “un type à l’allure fière” ‘a dashing fellow’ whom his friends hardly recognize (21); chronically unemployed and a touch apathetic, he even finds a job. In a self-reflective comment on the subversive nature of the novel as a whole, Uncle Guillaume directly confronts the surprisingly ambiguous implications of his own story: “C’est paradoxal, voyez-vous, mais ce sont les Nike qui lui ont permis de se dépasser, *ou plutôt son combat contre elles*” ‘It’s paradoxical, you see, but the Nikes allowed him to excel, *or, rather, his struggle to resist them*’ (22; my emphasis). Although the storyteller beats a hasty retreat, belatedly remembering to attribute victory to French resistance rather than American assistance (by chance—or not—p’tit Louis’s new job takes him to Normandy), the reader will already have recognized the latest illustration of one of Nike’s most successful advertising campaigns: p’tit Louis has become the French poster boy for the company’s injunction to “Just Do It!”

“Les Nike” also introduces us to the first of the two primary literary traditions that inform *Jeanne d’Arc fait tic-tac*. If *le conte merveilleux* ‘supernatural tale’ exists in recognizable form in all known cultures, Gran logically revitalizes a specifically French version of the genre. In *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, Robert Darnton argues convincingly that in pre-Revolutionary France the folktale, however strange and marvelous, serves as a realistic guide to the everyday life of the peasantry. Stranded in a dangerous world, the young heroes of “Le Petit Chaperon rouge” ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ or “Le Petit Poucet” ‘Tom Thumb’ typically outwit a physically stronger and financially more powerful enemy to save their own lives and to restore familial and communal order. Darnton further maintains that this essential plot of “Frenchness” defines a distinctive world view, which persists into the present as “a master theme of French culture in general” (64). Finally, though Darnton’s specific interest lies in the internal struggle leading up to the French Revolution and not in the threat of foreign

aggression, he qualifies Frenchness as “a defense strategy” in specific contrast to “the formula for conquering the world” characteristic of “its Anglo-Saxon opposite” (62).

Much like the seventeenth-century writers who first recorded the tales of the French oral tradition, Gran reinscribes the dominant codes and conventions of the genre to comment once again on the actual conditions of contemporary France. In Gran’s version of the classical French survival manual, updated for the twenty-first century, the familiar figure of the ogre, a.k.a. the wealthy bourgeois (Darnton 22), is played all too realistically, as we have seen, by *là-bas* and its ongoing process of the Americanization of France. Given the moral ambivalence of both the globalized world and the postmodern novel, Gran unsurprisingly tends to combine the naivety of the trusting victim and the resourcefulness of the cunning hero in a single person, as in the case of p’tit Louis. More importantly, however, the traditional lesson about the dangers of misplaced confidence and the rewards of deceitfulness—the celebration of French *malin* ‘craftiness’—spills over from the stories themselves into their narrative framework. Jean-Ramsès already characterizes Wolf as “assez niais” ‘rather simple’ in the first story (20), and he will take ever greater pleasure in his ability to manipulate a companion who is his superior in size and strength: “Le paradoxe voulait qu’il fût beaucoup plus musclé que moi . . . mais il ne s’en rendait pas compte, le benêt. On était entré dans un âge où la supériorité intellectuelle permettait de brouiller bien des cartes” ‘As paradox would have it, he was a lot more muscular than I was . . . but the simpleton didn’t realize it. We had entered an age in which intellectual superiority let one cloud a lot of issues’ (58). If Wolf’s name connotes his relative lack of cultural and linguistic refinement in a society whose self-image is that of *la civilisation* itself, Jean-Ramsès’s name, in keeping with his growing list of academic achievements and his burgeoning eloquence, incorporates the power and privilege of an ancient ruling class. Ultimately, of course, it is the wolf who needs to beware in traditional French folktales as well.

Lest the revival of the folktale in “Les Nike” appear to be unexpectedly straightforward, albeit ultimately displaced, its combination with another traditional literary genre alters even its initial reception. The first story in *Jeanne d’Arc fait tic-tac* already exhibits

several key elements of a form that will quickly become the dominant tradition that Gran seeks to satirize. The reception of *Oncle Guillaume's* tale, which frightens Jean-Ramsès so profoundly that he is unable to fall asleep, marks our entry into the realm of the fantastic.⁶ Unlike the enchanted object of the *conte merveilleux*, which performs its magic in the interest and at the behest of the meritorious hero, the fantastic object is possessed by an evil spirit whose uncontrollable powers terrify its flawed and complicitous victim. Though Jean-Ramsès knows that p'tit Louis's Nikes have been burned, he fantasizes that "l'esprit maléfique" 'the evil spirit' has escaped to seek out another pair of "sportives complaisantes où il pourrait se loger" 'accommodating athletic shoes in which to take up residence' (23). As Gran's vocabulary suggests, in fantastic literature human responsibility is partially assuaged by the obviously demonic nature of the adversary. Though *Oncle Guillaume* never identifies McDonald's or the United States, he openly acknowledges the presence of the Great Satan and its most famous representative; the snack-bar's big reddish-yellow M stands, of course, for "Méphistophélès" (15). In this context, the vague adverbial phrase *là-bas* serves to heighten his audience's anguish by emphasizing the unknown and perhaps the unknowable nature of the enemy.⁷

When "les forces occultes" seek human allies (19), they tend to be women, who often appear as figures of temptation in a genre that generally portrays sexuality as dangerous.⁸ Thus, in "Les Nike," p'tit Louis is initially seduced by a "vendeuse avec [une] voix de sirène" 'saleswoman with the voice of a siren' (10), mocked by female employees wherever his Nikes take him, and ultimately betrayed by his own girlfriend. So when Jean-Ramsès finally falls asleep, perhaps we should not be surprised at the transformation of the burning Nikes into a sexy, satirical, and sacrilegious vision of France's national heroine. Jeanne d'Arc makes her first appearance in the novel that bears her name as "une femme à demi-nue" 'a half-naked woman,' who calls to Jean-Ramsès through the flames, which further reveal her "voluptés" 'voluptuousness' as they burn away her clothes. Alas, the fire consumes Jeanne as well before Jean-Ramsès has time to act on his sexual fantasy (23), and the legendary "pucelle d'Orléans" 'Maid of Orleans' still dies a virgin. Even in the modern world of the fantastic, there are no happy endings.

The rigor with which “le fantastique” is distinguished from similar genres in French literary theory is particularly remarkable in contrast to the tendency in English, which doesn’t really have an equivalent noun, to position it within a vague category of “fantasy.” Indeed, even French critics appear to have trouble naming specifically American variations, rendered in Gilbert Millet and Denis Labbé’s recent and comprehensive survey of *Le Fantastique* as “la terreur moderne” ‘modern terror’ and “la fantasy urbaine” ‘urban fantasy’ (27). Since the genre originated in Europe (though it emerges simultaneously in England as well as France and Germany), this would not necessarily be surprising were it not for the fact that fantastic literature of Anglo-Saxon and especially American origin has come to dominate that produced in other countries and especially in France. Indeed, Millet and Labbé’s study bears a curious resemblance to *Oncle Guillaume’s* stories; its 350 pages are literally haunted by the specter of American influence. The dire consequences of the global popularity of American texts first appears in the opening paragraph of the “Avant-propos”—“Beaucoup en tirent la conclusion que le genre participe à l’envahissement de notre imaginaire par les Etats-Unis” ‘Lots of people conclude that the genre is part of the U.S. invasion of our imagination’ (5), and it is still there in the final pages of the “Conclusion”: “Quant au fantastique français, il a subi ces dernières années une si forte influence américaine que les efforts de [nos] auteurs ne parviennent pas toujours à la contrer” ‘As for the French fantastic, American influence has been so strong in recent years that the best efforts of our authors don’t always manage to counter it’ (358).⁹ How delightfully—and characteristically—ironic in that case that Gran should adopt the very arm that has apparently allowed America to colonize contemporary French culture as his own weapon of choice to wage war on American cultural imperialism in return. Indeed, *Jeanne d’Arc fait tic-tac* has much more in common with the “fantastique bon enfant, humoristique et proche du merveilleux” ‘good-natured, humorous fantastic, akin to the supernatural’ attributed to Washington Irving, “fondateur du fantastique américain” ‘founder of American fantastic literature,’ than with the Gothic and Romantic versions of the genre invented in Europe (Millet and Labbé 74).

At the same time, however, Gran is clearly familiar with a na-

tional and historical context he treats with characteristic underhandedness. In France, fantastic literature initially arose in the eighteenth century as a reaction against the excessive rationalism of the French Enlightenment (see, for example, Millet and Labbé 50–51). Though the word *matérialisme* never appears in *Jeanne d'Arc fait tic-tac*, the novel implicitly references the version of rationalism promoted by Denis Diderot and his fellow *encyclopédistes*, in which the conviction that reality is coextensive with physical matter excludes the possibility of supernatural intervention in human affairs. Using one of his favorite strategies, Gran shows absolute respect for the very tradition he simultaneously undermines. Thus, in his updated version of the fantastic, inexplicable and supernatural events are no longer a response to French *matérialisme*'s exaggerated confidence in the powers of reason but rather the result of a very different and distinctively American *materialism*, now defined as the excessive regard for worldly goods.¹⁰ In keeping with this shift in world view, which privileges cultural and economic agendas over theological and philosophical systems, Gran similarly redefines the two most important themes of the fantastic: the omnipresence of evil and the terror of death. In *Jeanne d'Arc fait tic-tac*, universal anguish in the face of human mortality and the mysteries of malfeasance is transformed into the specifically national anxiety of the French, who fear the metaphoric “death” of their country and their culture at the hands of American commercialism and consumerism. In Gran's version of the fantastic, fear and laughter clearly go hand in hand; and much of the humor stems from such shifts of register. The use of the generic codes and lexical conventions of the fantastic lead us to expect a degree of horror and gravity that we only actually encounter in comic and caricatured form. That Uncle Guillaume's delivery tends to the generically appropriate “deadpan” only adds to the fun.

Consistent with the fantastic's general assault on “materialism” and in preparation for the literal attack on “les dollars” in the second part of *Jeanne d'Arc fait tic-tac*, Uncle Guillaume's favorite themes and preferred metaphors are most frequently inspired by France's legendary disdain for money and everything associated with it, including, of course, the United States. Indeed, a quick survey of recent studies of French culture confirms the central importance of

this aversion: “[La] société française . . . met au pilori un monde [américain] jugé éminemment matérialiste” ‘French society . . . pillories an [American] world judged to be eminently materialistic’ (Verdaguer 273); “les Français [ont] une véritable répulsion pour l’argent” ‘the French [have] a veritable repulsion to money’ (Carroll 189); “en France, parler d’argent est de la dernière vulgarité” ‘in France it’s the height of vulgarity to talk about money’ (Stanger, *Sacrés Français!* 87); “le capitalisme [est] immoral” ‘capitalism [is] immoral,’ “l’esprit de lucre fait horreur” ‘lucrative gain is disgusting’ (Wylie and Brière 59); “l’hostilité au profit commercial et financier [caractérise la France]” ‘hostility to commercial and financial gain [is characteristic of France],’ and, finally, in a linguistic formula admirably suited to fantastic literature, “le profit [est] le signe de *l’esprit de lucre, donc du mal*” ‘profit [is] the sign of a greedy mind, that is, of evil’ (Wylie and Brière 159; my emphasis). Gran demonstrates this principle in a variety of different ways, as two more examples from *Oncle Guillaume*’s stories effectively illustrate.

“Le Moustique” ‘The Mosquito’ takes the metaphor of “dirty money” literally. Bruno, the antique dealer, accepts payment in dollars without taking the necessary precautions to protect himself against “on ne sait jamais quels microbes” ‘you never know what kind of germs,’ in contrast to the bank employees who put on hospital gloves and carefully avert their faces before depositing the money into Bruno’s account (90). *L’antiquaire* himself will need strong doses of antibiotics to recover from the malignant effects of his own carelessness; the single dollar bill he inadvertently leaves to fester in his pocket turns into the familiar vampire figure of fantastic literature, now personified by the first president of the United States: “le dollar est gorgé du sang. . . [Bruno] remarque du rouge autour de la bouche de George Washington” ‘the dollar bill is saturated with blood. . . [Bruno] notices George Washington’s red-rimmed mouth’ (92). In “La Boîte à transfert” ‘The Transfer Box’ the United States has found a way to convert France’s “waste” products into an ever renewable natural resource in an extraordinary demonstration of American efficiency, pragmatism, technological advancement, and, of course, capitalist greed. A kind of postmodern alchemy allows the “boîte à transfert” to transmute the idle hours of the French—those of “les pauses cafés, les faux congés maladies,

les grèves abusives” ‘coffee breaks, fake sick days, abusive strikes’ (119)—into American wealth.

Because the *conte fantastique* depends on a series of well-established codes and conventions, whose very familiarity makes them easy to subvert, the genre lends itself particularly well to Gran’s satirical and parodic intentions. Moreover, this inevitable foregrounding of textual strategies also encourages the self-reflexive exploration of literature itself. As Jean-Luc Steinmetz notes in the conclusion to *La Littérature fantastique*, the genre “interroge le phénomène littéraire lui-même” ‘questions literature itself’ (121). Traditionally, the fantastic’s particular preoccupation with establishing credibility—“le fantastique ne peut fonctionner qu’avec l’assentiment du lecteur” ‘fantastic literature cannot function without the reader’s approbation’ (Millet and Labbé 11)—has been the primary focus of its literary self-consciousness. The detailed descriptions of the café and its clientele, which anchor the fantastic events of *Jeanne d’Arc fait tic-tac* in a realistic world, are characteristic of the genre. So too is the relationship established between the writer’s and the reader’s diegetic representatives. Uncle Guillaume does not invent the stories he tells but merely reports on the lives of his friends and acquaintances, many of whom are also well known to his audience. In this context, Uncle Abe performs a particularly important function as a lightning rod for disbelief. His skepticism functions paradoxically to reinforce the conviction of everyone else, and all doubt is metaphorically expelled with his ritual exclusion from the café.

Yet, these superficial signs of respect for the traditional realism and narrative structure of fantastic literature are inevitably altered and subverted in Gran’s postmodern version of the genre. Not only does realism consistently escape its usual framing function at the threshold of the fantastic and invade the fantastic itself, to their mutual deconstruction, but not even the explicit adoption of the extradiegetic reader as a member of the fictional community (“Vous connaissez, je n’en doute pas, le salon de madame Saint-Ange, au moins de réputation” ‘I’m sure you’re familiar, at least by reputation, with Madame Saint-Ange’s salon’ [29]) can prevent a propensity to laughter on our part that is fatal to the credibility of the fantastic. Lest anyone still be willing to suspend disbelief, in the final paragraphs of

Jeanne d'Arc fait tic-tac, we learn that Jean-Ramsès, purportedly the objective witness to his uncle's storytelling and the accurate recorder of his stories, is in fact the author of the text we have been reading, now clearly retitled as fiction: "Son célèbre recueil *Mille et une histoires d'Oncle Guillaume* est considéré comme un classique" 'His famous collection *A Thousand and One Stories of Uncle Guillaume* is considered a classic' (341). Gran's novel admirably proves Millet and Labbé's hypothesis that in a comic register, "le fantastique transgresse ses propres règles, montrant qu'il est capable de s'attaquer à tout, y compris à lui-même" 'the fantastic breaks its own rules, showing itself capable of attacking everything, including itself' (355).¹¹

"Le Manuel d'histoire" 'The History Book,' the last of the eleven stories related by Oncle Guillaume, serves as both the culmination of the first part of *Jeanne d'Arc fait tic-tac* and the transition to the second part of the novel. The final example of the fantastic object is a satanically possessed book, whose multiple levels of internal duplication mirror the self-referential nature of the text as a whole. The history manual, in keeping with the central concern of the novel in which it is contained, portrays a "monde à l'envers" 'world turned upside down' in which *là-bas* now controls the past as well as the present. Not only is France reduced to the passing comment and the occasional footnote in this version of world history, but the author of the textbook openly slanders "sa glorieuse chronique" 'her chronicle of glory' (170). In another *mise-en-abyme* embedded within the first, Jeanne d'Arc makes her second appearance in the novel as the primary example of this historical travesty. In an excerpt whose reproduction within Gran's text parodies the style and lexicon of historical writing, France's national saint and personal savior is dismissed as an example of the religious hysteria and collective madness so prevalent in the Middle Ages.

In an historical revision of its own, Oncle Guillaume's audience promptly finds not Jeanne d'Arc but the author of the textbook guilty of heresy. In action that both foreshadows and imitates the war to come, Oncle Abe is physically assaulted for acts of treason on the eve of his emigration to America: "Ça, c'est pour Jeanne d'Arc" 'That one's for Joan of Arc,' declares the attacker who delivers the first blow (183). In keeping with the incredible credibility (oxymoron intended) of Oncle Guillaume's tales and with the double mean-

ing of the word *histoire*, which connects fiction to reality and transforms story into history, we turn the page introducing the second part of *Jeanne d'Arc fait tic-tac* to find ourselves literally transported into a different book: “Le livre d’histoire s’était brusquement ouvert sur une page blanche. Il importait d’y inscrire une épopée” “The history book had suddenly opened to a blank page. It was important to write down an epic’ (198). In a new interpretation of the title of Gran’s novel, its eponymous heroine once again prepares to lead the French army into battle from command headquarters located in the “invincible” and “indomitable” aircraft carrier that bears her name (202); time now marches on to restore order to the world: “la remise des pendules à l’heure a commencé” ‘we have begun to set the record straight’ (199).

The primary comic strategy of the second half of *Jeanne d'Arc fait tic-tac* implicitly pays homage to the most recent source of tension between France and the United States. Using French wit and irony as his principal weapons in a new war of words, Gran constructs his narrative of a Gallic invasion of the land of dollars as a parody of the current American conflict in Iraq.¹² Thus, France assumes its historical role as the defender of justice and the avenger of evil only when all diplomatic efforts have failed—or so claim the government authorities who send Wolf and his comrades into battle. Thanks to the technological advancement of modern warfare, the air force bombs only strategic targets—airports, bridges, gas stations—while carefully avoiding civilian sites—schools, hospitals, churches—or at least, *nuance* as the French would say, “autant que la visibilité le perme[t]” ‘in so far as visibility permits’ (198). Indeed, what might seem like armed conflict cannot really be qualified as warfare at all, at least not “au sens péjoratif habituel” ‘in the usual pejorative sense’ (206). France comes not to conquer, let alone occupy, a sovereign nation for whose population it has the greatest respect, but only to free an unjustly oppressed people: “ces masses enchaînées par la loi des banquiers, ce peuple exploité [qui] attend qu’on le libère” ‘the masses enslaved by the rule of bankers, an exploited population waiting for us to free it’ (200). As expected, a grateful citizenry welcomes their liberators with relief, even acclaim: “Il y en a qui se mettent à nous applaudir” ‘Some of them began to clap for us,’ enthuses Wolf (224).

French leaders appear to have given somewhat more thought to the post-invasion phase of war than the American administration on whom Gran models his satire. Not only have millions of leaflets “en dollar” been airdropped prior to disembarkation (223), but in a carefully planned “deuxième phase,” ground troops are sent in to change hearts and minds: “Il faut briser le mythe dollar, la culture dollar, pour leur enlever l’envie de se battre” ‘We must destroy the myth and the culture of the Dollars in order to take away their desire to fight’ (229). Indeed, in Gran’s pastiche of a highly literate nation prone to classify (in both senses of the word) information, there is a pamphlet to meet every need. Wolf, for example, sets off on a highly symbolic mission to Disneyland armed with stacks of “la brochure numéro deux, ‘Lutte contre l’hégémonie culturelle’” ‘Brochure Number Two, “Struggle against Cultural Hegemony”’ (257). If the United States tends to mask aggression behind its unselfish desire to export the world’s best political and economic system, France is still determined to fulfill the *mission civilisatrice* that defines its destiny. Certainly, French troops machine-gun Mickey and Minnie, pummel the Lion King, bulldoze Space Mountain, and burn the Aristocats, but only as a necessary prelude to cultural conversion: “Ne pas détruire, substituer. Tel est le mot d’ordre. . . . Signoret à Monroe, Douillet à Schwarzenegger, le jambon-beurre au Big Mac” ‘Don’t destroy, substitute. That’s the watchword. . . . Signoret for Monroe, Douillet for Schwarzenegger, the ham sandwich for the Big Mac.’ As for Elvis’s successor, little wonder that “l’affaire n’est pas tranchée” ‘the matter has not been resolved,’ given the difficulty of the choice: Johnny, Jacques Brel, or Edith Piaf? (270).¹³

Still, despite the army’s “sentiment d’invulnérabilité” and faith in the inevitability of French victory, the occupation quickly encounters unexpected problems (275). If unprepared and demoralized American troops pose little threat, American culture, in contrast, turns out to be surprisingly resilient. Wolf’s company is forced to devote hours of debate to “le vaste problème du port d’armes et du deuxième amendement” ‘the huge problem of the right to bear arms and the second amendment,’ which continues to produce a few “psychopaths” who insist on fighting for their country (260). Moreover, years of anti-French propaganda have also taken their toll. Soon “fanatics” form pockets of armed resistance, and their as-

tonishing effectiveness—“on dirait que les dollars ont pris les leçons de résistance armée chez tous les peuples qu'ils ont eu sous la botte” ‘you’d think the Dollars had taken lessons of armed resistance from all the nations they’ve trod upon’—raises the specter of a full-blown insurrection (284). Worse still, French soldiers have been issued outdated and inadequate equipment—the example of insufficiently armored tanks is hardly coincidental—and not enough troops have been committed to combat. Indeed, the “disinformation” spread by newspapers back home is rapidly eroding support for the war. Not even the capture of Number Three on the list of most-wanted Americans—the CEO of McDonald’s for the entire state of Georgia—followed by the even more sensational seizure of “le président des dollars [qui] se terrait dans une cave comme un rat” ‘the president of the Dollars [who] was holed up in a cellar like a rat’ (327) can restore the morale of French troops. Soon, neither the Geneva Convention nor the “idéaux humanistes hérités de Montesquieu” ‘humanistic ideals inherited from Montesquieu’ can prevent soldiers from taking out their frustration on prisoners of war; despite inconclusive investigations and court martials that end in acquittal, reports of torture persist (305).

Although Gran’s primary focus on Irak should by now be evident, his satirical intentions are as usual broad, complex, and ultimately double-edged. Notably, *Jeanne d’Arc fait tic-tac* also includes frequent references and allusions to France’s own military past—or to its absence. In the second part of the novel, the voice of Oncle Guillaume is replaced by frequent quotations attributed to General de Gaulle, another partisan of anti-Americanism and fabricator of French *gloire*. Although France’s World War II liberation of itself only took place in de Gaulle’s mythic imagination, the French now merit an “F-Day,” a landing in a top secret location following months of training on an island in the Caribbean. In contrast to the heavy casualties suffered in the Normandy invasion, the Florida debarkation is relatively cost free thanks to the *dollars*’ inexplicable failure to construct bunkers to protect their shores. In keeping with both its own colonialist history—and a persistent French stereotype of Americans—Gran also parodies the conquerors who set out to civilize a primitive people. In fact, *les dollars* are now direct descendants of “nos ancêtres, les Gaulois” ‘our Gallic ancestors,’ who cou-

rageously colonized the new world in the sixteenth century, albeit for a scant fifteen months (232). In a parody of both an adult addressing a wayward child and a missionary condescending to ignorant savages, the commander of the French troops speaks to Floridians “au nom du Grand-Aïeul qui habite en France” ‘in the name of the Great Ancestor who lives in France,’ whose “chagrin” forces him to chastise “ses enfants” ‘his children’ (235–36). Ironically, the attractive gifts offered in exchange for renewed submission to “la voix de la raison” ‘the voice of reason’—wine, Hermès accessories, cosmetics, the collector’s edition of *A bout de souffle*, a few of Saint-Exupéry’s books—reinforce the very conception of France as the exclusive home of luxury, cuisine, and culture that the French have come to resent deeply (235–37). Finally, Gran pays humorous homage to the Civil War as well; as Wolf’s unit advances on Atlanta and enemy troops mass along the Missouri border, the French distribute yet another brochure to remind (Southern) *dollars* of their past support and to explain anew “pourquoi le Sud confédéré doit devenir indépendant du Nord yankee” ‘why the Confederate South must become independent of the Yankee North’ (254).

In general, just as Gran ironically rewrites the literature of the fantastic in the first part of *Jeanne d’Arc fait tic-tac*, he constructs the overall narrative framework of “Feu!” according to the codes and conventions of the war novel. Although his initial exploration of the discourse of war is still characteristically lighthearted, Gran’s satire soon turns darker and more realistic, in keeping with the genre’s greater potential for seriousness. Indeed, at moments, laughter no longer masks an openly critical voice; fictional France may not be believably pacifist but its author would appear to be. Gran begins with a playful linguistic parody of basic training, in which the sergeant comically badgers his men—“Présentez am, repsez am, présentez am . . . c’est mou, ça claque pas, repsez am, présentez am, tu fais quoi là” ‘Present arms, order arms, present arms . . . too sluggish, pick it up, order arms, present arms, what the hell’s going on?’—while recruits are reduced to rhythmic grunts that appear to evoke a famously candy-coated snack: “M . . . m . . . M . . . m . . . MmMmMm . . . MMMmmm” (194–95). On the eve of battle, the commanding officer rouses the troops with a familiar rhetorical masterpiece *à la de Gaulle*. Wolf’s representative letters, interspersed throughout the

novel, serve the traditional purpose of reassuring his family, notably by protesting, far too much to be convincing, that he is not afraid; even so, army censors visibly eradicate any truth that might shock the folks back home: “On a enterré CHANTE le sergent” ‘We buried SUNG THE PRAISES of the sergeant’ (253). *Jeanne d’Arc fait tic-tac* also includes, in escalating order of misfortune, the standard tales of military life—portraits of comrades in arms, stories of drug use, the inevitable betrayal by the girl back home. Gran undermines the myth of heroism by offering us a burlesque version of the accidental killing of a grocery store manager who literally “tombe dans les corn-flakes” ‘falls into the cornflakes’ (231).¹⁴ In contrast, the narrative of a Black Hawk’s massacre of French soldiers told in the style of a children’s story—“le méchant hélicoptère . . . souriait” ‘the big bad helicopter . . . was smiling’ (242, 245)—significantly increases our sense of the horror of battle. Similarly, the hero’s tragic death is exposed as a meaningless sacrifice by its ironic juxtaposition to anti-war protests, post-war revisionism condemning former officers as “criminels” and “nazillons,” and an erasure of historical memory so significant that Wolf’s name is engraved on a war memorial erected to honor the dead of a different war (338). Finally, the suggestively named Colonel *Dujardin*, the disabused former commander of the troops, retires to “un coin perdu” ‘a place miles from anywhere’ to tend his very Voltairien garden.

In the end, the novel as a whole similarly returns to its origins in the folktale. America metaphorically cries uncle only in the utopian fantasy of the dying soldier—“notre drapeau tricolore flotte sur la Maison-Blanche. . . . Des hauts-parleurs diffusent les chants de Juliette Greco” ‘the French flag is floating over the White House. . . . Loudspeakers transmit the songs of Juliette Greco’ (308)—but Frenchness survives and France nonetheless triumphs in the person of the prototypical hero of oral tradition. Wolf’s final defeat has in fact been preordained, if not from birth, then at least from his first disappointing “carnet scolaire” ‘report card’ (166). Even in early adolescence, the precociously cunning Jean-Ramsès understands that his childhood ruses reflect the structure of French society: the stupidity and passivity of “tous les Wolf du monde” ‘all the Wolfs in the world’ destine them to serve as “viande à canon” ‘cannon fodder’ in the interest of “nous, les élites” ‘the nation’s elite’ (65). Little wonder

then that Jean-Ramsès tricks Wolf into volunteering and seduces his fiancée in his absence. In Gran's contemporary revision of the folk-tale, which implicitly—and cleverly—equates *énarque* “a graduate of the French national school for civil servants” and *arnaquer* “swindler,” the treaty that Jean-Ramsès negotiates with les dollars is the crowning achievement of his meteoric rise from ENA to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Still, Wolf's inevitable death is preceded by a triumph of his own. In keeping with his naturally baser instincts and the brutishness suggested by his name, he tracks down Oncle Abe in America, stages a mock trial for treason, and condemns him to death by forcing him to drink, to the accompaniment of “*Chevaliers de la table ronde*” “The Knights of the Round Table,” 120 bottles of the imported wine that has transformed the café's scapegoat into a wealthy expatriate (320).

Thus, in a final comic reversal, *Jeanne d'Arc fait tic-tac* metaphorically puts to death the myth of the “oncle d'Amérique” ‘American uncle,’ the specifically French version of the American dream, and Oncle Guillaume is definitively avenged.¹⁵ In final vindication of my own essay, let me reassure my audience that *Jeanne d'Arc fait tic-tac* offers its readers a great many more pleasures still to be discovered in an adventure on which I hope they will rapidly embark. To borrow Oncle Guillaume's final words, Gran too has lots more stories to tell you and “Dieu sait qu'il y a en ce monde les histoires formidables!” ‘God knows there are some great stories in this world!’ (186–87).

Notes

1 The French proverb on which the epigraph to this essay is based actually reads “Dis-moi qui tu hantes, je te dirai qui tu es” ‘Tell me whom *you* haunt, and I'll tell you who you are.’ All translations from the French are my own.

2 In general, works in French tend to be less explicitly comparative in approach and often involve discussions of anti-Americanism or critiques of U.S. economic and political policies.

3 Born in Russia, Iegor Gran has lived in France since the age of ten. Even

if he retains some sense of cultural distance from his childhood—and such culturally-specific awards as the “Grand Prix de l’Humour noir” and the “Prix Rive Droite/Rive Gauche” for *O.N.G.!* (2003) suggest otherwise—he does not share the famous “double culture” so common to other writers interested in Franco-Anglo-American cultures and relations. Gran’s earlier novels treat such characteristically French concerns as *le baccalauréat* (*Ipsa facto* [1998]) and *le prix Goncourt* (*Le Truoc-Nog* (2003)).

4 In general, Gran references a conception of France so frequently discussed that its attribution to a specific secondary source would be totally arbitrary. Notably, it can be found in all of the works cited at the beginning of this essay.

5 In a comic version of the epic struggle between France and the foreign, Jean-Ramsès wonders who would win “si Tintin se battait contre Astérix dans une bataille genre tous les coups sont permis” ‘if Tintin fought Astérix in the kind of battle where anything goes’ (16). His inability to decide may be the first sign of Jean-Ramsès’s future willingness to negotiate with the enemy for surely the answer is obvious: the original Frenchman, France’s national hero and the popular culture counterpart to Jeanne d’Arc, vanquishes the native of Belgium, perhaps the only country more frequently vilified by the French than the United States and the locus from which European restrictions on traditional French farming and food currently emanate.

6 My discussion of the fantastic draws on a number of critical and theoretical works. See, in particular, Steinmetz and Millet and Labbé, whose 2005 survey of the genre is the most current and comprehensive to date.

7 Millet and Labbé note the frequent use in fantastic literature of such vague terms as “ça” ‘it’ and “chose” ‘thing’ to the same effect (320).

8 See also Gran’s “Interdit aux mineurs” ‘No Minors Allowed’ (99–112) for an extended exploration of this generic commonplace.

9 For intervening examples, see also 99, 104, 108, and 112. The determination to see the United States as dominant as well as dominating is particularly evident here, given the two most frequently cited examples of its

influence. If Stephen King is certainly American, “Harry Potter” (like J. K. Rowlings) certainly is not.

10 The influence of Voltaire’s *conte philosophique* “philosophical tale” is also visible in *Jeanne d’Arc fait tic-tac*, which similarly privileges social satire and moral instruction. More specifically, “Le grand magasin” “The Department Store,” the only story set *là-bas*, features Nicole, a.k.a. “Notre Candide” “Our Candide,” whose imprudent bravado—“Comme si chez nous tout allait pour le mieux” “As if everything at home were for the best”—disappears quickly in the face of the horrors she encounters in San Francisco (68–69). Elsewhere, however, Gran predictably satirizes Voltaire and his fellow *philosophes*’ confidence in the power of *la Raison*; Oncle Guillaume’s stories include a number of amusing examples of faculty logic and false reasoning presented as revelatory and insightful.

11 In preparation for the revelation of Jean-Ramsès’s authorship, many of the stories within Gran’s novel foreground the process and practice of writing and highlight the self-conscious construction of the text; see, for example, “Hemingway” (147–64) and “Le Piège de l’ordinateur” “The Computer Trap” (129–46). Moreover, Oncle Guillaume’s stories often appear to be generated out of their own narrative framework—or vice versa.

12 My analysis of Gran’s novel, like the novel itself, assumes an audience familiar with both the facts and the rhetoric of the war in Irak.

13 Curiously, there are no plans to introduce *les dollars* to France’s rich literary, historical, and artistic heritage, whether in comic recognition of France’s tendency to view its own media celebrities as icons of high culture or simply out of resignation due to the limited intelligence of a people who haven’t even tried to learn French.

14 In French, *tomber dans les pommes* (literally “to fall into the apples”) is an idiomatic expression meaning to faint or pass out.

15 The French, a people remarkable for never having emigrated in significant numbers, actually do tend to see those citizens who leave the country as something akin to traitors. Similarly, the absence of immigrants of French

descent in the United States no doubt encourages mutual perceptions of difference and ongoing cultural conflict. See, for example, Verdager 260 and Wylie and Brière 82, 115.

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