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All three novels to date of Marie Chaix--a very gifted newcomer to the novel--are rooted in autobiography and in events that traumatized her family. Each constitutes a quest centered upon a different person: the father in Les Lauriers du lac de Constance (1976), the mother in Les Silences ou la vie d'une femme (1976), and the female narrator herself in L'Age du tendre (1979).[1]

The feminine identity that will progressively emerge in the third novel is closely linked to the awareness gained in the course of the previous quests. The second and third novel in particular are intricately enmeshed in the same emotional turf, and one can say that L'Age du tendre is the outcome of Les Silences while both rest on the desire for an objective approach in Les Lauriers du lac de Constance. The narratrix' identity as a woman is the end result of a slow process that begins in the first novel and is completed in the third, although the first two narratives are told from a different point of view and for a different purpose.

Once grown up, the daughter wants to look at events that took place prior to her birth as objectively as possible in order to understand how her father's political action led to a tragedy that perturbed everyone around him. She must sort out contradictory pictures of the father: those held by the mother and older children for whom he was a "knight" and a "hero" against the condemnation of the world outside that cast him off as a traitor. Then she must come to terms with feelings of jealousy and distrust that had started when, as an adolescent, she no longer was the main recipient of her mother's attentive affection after the release from prison of the family head and his return home. In the first volume, therefore, the need for objectivity is necessitated by the desire to reconcile those conflicting images as well as to exorcize her personal resentment. It is reflected primarily in the subtitle: "Chronicle of a Collaboration," which suggests the

recounting of facts based on historical reality, happening in a precise time and place and leading to a particular end, in this case a disaster ironically hinted at with the "laurels" of the title. In a chronicle-type story, the chronological unfolding of events is essential. Consequently, the structure of the first novel is much tighter with a division in two parts, each with titled chapters and accurate dates. The much longer first section is a retrospective covering the time before the birth of the author pieced together from various accounts and with inserted passages from the father's diaries. In the second, which spans her early childhood (the life of the family in reduced circumstances in a two-room basement after the Liberation), whatever relates to the periodic visits to the prison, the mother's tears or the public reprobation, is seen from the point of view of an uncomprehending child. The aim is to trace back the history of a man and his family in the context of a specific country (France) during a specific period (the German occupation and the ensuing Liberation) in an attempt to show how a man of great learning and intelligence, of undoubted patriotism, having acted heroically during the war, came to be sentenced to death, then reprieved to lifelong imprisonment as a collaborator--that is to say in the atmosphere of 1945--as a traitor to his country. She chooses to treat all the family members as if they were fictional characters by referring to them by their first name from the predominant viewpoint of a third person narrative. This is also an appropriate object-ifying device in the case of Marie Chaix since the reasons for the father's downfall originated before her birth and had their disastrous results when "the little one" was too young to perceive or even remember them.

As a consequence of the objective vision that prevails in Lauriers, the daughter's search for the real father is partly successful as expressed on the last page: "Good-bye, Sir. You can sleep in peace" (p. 187).[2] But she also comes to a

better understanding of her parents' relationship, of each one's weaknesses and responsibilities. She becomes aware of the wife's silent submissiveness, of her worshipping attitude and unquestioning acceptance of the husband's almost constant absences resulting from his political activities:

> Her knight has left for the Crusades. We'll have a feast when he comes home. Meanwhile, let's embroider, sew, cry in our fine linen handkerchiefs. Let's bring up our children in the respect of religion, family and fatherland (p. 15).[3]

The lonely wife takes refuge more and more in music and in her dreams so as to forget that their lives are no longer united but run on parallel tracks. Fear about the outcome of an active commitment that goes against the majority's opinion begins to creep into her consciousness, but she dares not break a silence that has traditionally been the rule for all women in her family. She still loves her husband as much as ever, but she utters a sigh of relief when he leaves the house after his short but disquieting appearances.

L'Age du tendre takes up more or less where Lauriers ends, that is when the father is released from prison after only ten years because of a change in international alignments and public opinion brought about by the Cold War. Focused on the developing identity of the daughter-narrator and on her emotional growth, this third volume calls for a subjective viewpoint. The change from objective to subjective vision is evident in the first chapter which covers the childhood recollections and goes over some events previously mentioned in Lauriers. The book is divided into chapters in which the word "landscape" appears three times in the title, eight times in the subtitle and where an adjective of color or atmosphere confirms the impression that each unit constitutes a framed painting suggestive of and corresponding to an important aspect or period in the young girl's life.[4] The novel is thus composed of a succession of self-contained and slightly impressionistic

psychological landscapes that, taken together, retrace the steps of the narratrix' development from child to adolescent, from young woman to expectant mother. These selected key moments in the search for self-identity are narrated in the first person, and the general tenor of the style is highly lyrical as well as free-flowing and extremely original. The subjective atmosphere is further intensified by occasional fervent invocations in the second person or by outbursts of tenderness or of anger.

Placed at the opening of this "picture gallery," and repeated at the close in a much shorter and slightly modified manner, is an all-important introduction built around a metaphor. Marie Chaix calls "ludion" the foetus inside the mother's womb. She views this mother/child biological symbiosis as the root of all love relationships, as the basis for any love exchange between the "I" and the "thou," between lover and loved one: "Love, you are always the same. You were born in the mother's womb...Masculine or feminine, you are the same one that dazzles, moves and transports us to heaven" (p.4).[5] The "ludion" metaphor makes us visualize in a freshly innovative way this mother/child togetherness which unfortunately loses its important connotation of playful freedom (derived from the Latin origin of the word) in its English translation as "Cartesian diver" or "bottle-imp." Appended at both ends, the "ludion" metaphor gives Chaix' latest volume its encompassing framework and deepest significance. Framing the various stages of the narrator's developing identity, this image acts as cohesive unifier by containing within a single space (the book covers) different moments of her personality from the time she was in her mother's womb as a "ludion" and the present when she carries a child of her own. The structure of the novel may thus be meant as a formal evocation of its content through

the recurrence of the ludion image in the opening and closing pages, but accompanied by a change of personal pronouns (from I to thou) and of tenses (from past to future). Chaix thus suggests the continuity of the biological cycle. The mother/child loving communion symbolized by the "ludion" must be followed, however, by the traumatic separation of childbirth, and the two are inextricably joined in Marie Chaix' emotionality. Whereas the mother-ludion symbiosis means love in the most idyllic state of perfection, childbirth--which ends that union--is immersed in ambivalence with its intermingling of joy and tears, love and suffering, union and separation. The ambivalence of the mother-child relationship after childbirth is evoked by playing on sound similarities and alliterations that exist between the French words for love, mother, death and the first two persons of the Latin verb amare, indicating the basic communication between the I and the thou:

> Amo, amas, maman, mamour, mourir, le verbe aimer tu l'apprendras en même temps que mes larmes, la ritournelle, toi aussi tu la chanteras, amour, amour, pour guérir de mourir (Age du tendre, p. 189).

Having discovered love with her mother's tears, the daughter tells her unborn ludion that he, too, is going to learn from his mother's suffering the same love song that will console him from dying.

The ludion-childbirth conjunction not only symbolizes the never-ending biological cycle and life's ambivalence, but also functions as the source of Marie Chaix' metaphorical network. This is apparent, for instance, in the poignant fear which grips the mother who has just given birth to her child:

> With life, I gave you death. While I close my door on a new solitude, I look at you crying, writhing and discovering that you, too, are alone. The way that will soothe your anguish is the one that will bring you back to me. For a time (p.188).[6]

The "door" that opens to permit the ludion's independent

"life" also "closes" on two "solitudes." And solitude or separation means emotional "death" that love alone can remedy for a while. The womb is a cozy "house" that protects the child from the threats of the outside, from "the blows struck him by this outer world which, without his knowledge, stretches to infinity on the other side of that distended belly, the other and unimaginable side" (p.9).[7]

Metaphors of houses, rooms, enclosed spaces are found in the titles of several chapters of L'Age du tendre as well as images of doors or windows that act as protection or separation and recur throughout Marie Chaix' writings. The traumatic shock from union to separation experienced at childbirth at the moment when what was felt as one was suddenly torn asunder, recurs all through the narratrix' life as perceptions of acute duality. And the metaphors describing those moments spring from the same recognizable web of subconscious imagery. The adolescent girl suddenly feels that she "breaks into two" and sees herself as two different persons: "On one bank remains the child smiling in her checkered apron stained with red jam... But on the opposite bank, there is the other who looks at herself without recognition" (p.86).[8] A similar experience takes place when, by chance, the young girl discovers a source of pleasure in her sex organs which become perceived as separate from her body, as having a life apart from her own (p.89).[9]

On the other hand, every love will be an attempt at recapturing either the feeling of oneness and protective tenderness that was the expectant mother's or the security and sheltered intimacy enjoyed by the ludion in the womb. The bonds that unite mother and child are undoubtedly crucial in Marie Chaix' world as a study of her major themes and visual imagery would prove. Her emotional development seems in part the outcome of an intense love for and sole dependence on her mother during childhood until age twelve when the father was in prison. She was her "mother's little shadow, clutching her hand" (p.135) and "In feminine

territory, [she] built [her] first house" (p.179).[10]

The search for self-identity--as presented in L'Age du tendre--thus springs from a deep-seated identification with the mother that directs the itinerary of the quest on a journey from the "same" to the "other," from the "feminine" to the "masculine," from the "hard" to the "tender," through a series of loves for women who are mother images: "In my life, until there was a man, there always was a woman... whose face would forever quiver with the lost reflection of the first woman beloved above all others" (p.132).[11] And: "Unknowingly, they have taught me how to love women before men, how to understand them and fear men's difference" (p.60).[12]

The depth of the daughter's identification with the mother, however, fully comes to light with the latter's impending death in the second novel. During the long weeks when the elderly woman lies in a coma on a hospital bed, the daughter refuses to accept that the beloved is now a body without soul, a shell emptied of what constituted her real self. Because the unique person she loved has become split into two irreconcilable entities, the grieving narratrix will "know two parallel lives; one, visible, that will accompany [her] body wherever it is taken and another, the nocturnal one, which will inherit. . . the lived-dreamed scenes of a dying woman's life" (Silences, p.33).[13] Through recollections or imaginings she reconstitutes her mother's past memories in order to re-establish the unity that was disrupted by the stroke and make it whole again. The daughter thus carries her mother's life in her mind as she had once been carried in her mother's womb. The normally existing parent/child relationship is reversed by means of this imaginative symbiosis. It is formally conveyed in the novel by a circular structure and the constantly shifting identity of the first person pronoun that fuses mother with daughter.

We may well see in this imaginary coexistence--at the inception of Silences--a counterpart to the biological symbiosis that is crucial in L'Age du tendre. This process of mental identification first results, therefore, in the reversal of the situation just mentioned whereby the dying woman is now dependent on her daughter's memory for any remaining life. But it also leads to another more important reversal when the daughter rejects the mother's uxorial attitude in her own name and as a way of avenging the departed's adoring submission to her husband. But both instances of reversal (relationships in Silences and attitudes as a wife in L'Age du tendre) appear as vindications of the silent mother, whether it be a silence caused by illness or consented to out of love.

Thus we can say that the narratrix' identity as a woman is grounded in her profound love for and identification with the mother (the main theme of Silences), which eventually lead her to an affirmation of her self-identity through a reassessment of women's role as mothers and wives (as shown in L'Age du tendre). By finding meaning and relevance in her maternity, the narratrix of L'Age du tendre perpetuates a major aspect of her mother's destiny and proclaims the mother/child relationship as the cornerstone of all loves. But she also angrily rejects the other facet of the maternal way of life by revolting against what has traditionally been woman's lot in a male-oriented society. And it is to the father, as if to challenge him personally, that she addresses her defiant refusal of the silence, the waiting and "the tears that I, his daughter become woman, I will never shed for a man" (L'Age du tendre, p.123).[14]

NOTES

[1]All three novels published by Seuil, Paris. All quotations from these editions will be inserted in the text.

[2]All quotations in English are my own translations. The original will be given in a note: "Adieu monsieur. Tu peux dormir tranquille."

[3]"Le seigneur est parti pour les croisades. Nous fêterons dignement son retour. En attendant, brodons, cousons, pleurons dans nos mouchoirs de batiste. Elevons nos enfants dans la religion, dans le respect de la famille et de la patrie." (Lauriers, p. 15)

[4]As examples, titles of a few chapters:

Chapter 1: La maison blanche; premier paysage.

Chapter 2: La maison grise; deuxième paysage.

Chapter 4: Paysage en rouge.

Chapter 11: L'Ile au coeur; paysage vu d'une fenêtre.

[5]"Amour, tu es toujours le même. Tu nais au creux maternel... Masculin ou feminin, tu es le même qui éblouis, secoues, envoies au ciel." (Age du tendre, p. 187)

[6]"...en même temps que la vie, je t'ai donné la mort. Tandis que je ferme ma porte sur une nouvelle solitude, je te regarde crier, te tordre et découvrir, toi aussi, que tu es seul. Le chemin qui calmera ta peur est celui qui te ramènera jusqu'à moi. Pour un temps." (Age du tendre, p. 188)

[7]"...les multiples coups portés par cet ailleurs dont il ne sait pas qu'il s'étale à l'infini, de l'autre coté du ventre tendu, autre et inimaginable versant." (Age du tendre, p. 9)

[8]"...sur une rive reste l'une, enfant-gnome souriant dans son tablier à carreaux taché de confiture rouge... Mais sur l'autre rive, il y a l'autre, qui se regarde et ne se reconnait pas." (Age du tendre, p. 86)

[9]"Son sexe, comme séparé d'elle, vit à son insu, d'une vie intense, absolument indépendante de sa vie à elle, de sa volonté et de tout ce qu'elle croyait savoir de son corps."

[10]"...petite ombre de ma mère, accrochée à sa main ferme..." (Lauriers, p. 135) "En terre féminine, je bâtis ma première maison." (Age du tendre, p. 179)

[11]"...jusqu'à ce qu'il y ait un homme, dans ma vie il y eut toujours une femme..." (Age du tendre, p. 132)

[12]"...sans le vouloir, elles m'ont appris à aimer les femmes avant les hommes, à les comprendre, elles, à les redouter, eux et leur différence." (Age du tendre, p. 60)

[13]"...je connaîtrai deux vies parallèles; celle, visible, qui accompagnera ton corps où ils décideront de le conduire et l'autre, la nocturne, héritage de... scènes vécues-rêvées de la vie d'une femme qui s'en va." (Silences, p. 33)

[14]"...les larmes... que moi, sa fille devenue femme, je ne verserai jamais pour un homme." (Age du tendre, p. 123)