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THE ROLE OF THE FEMININE CHARACTERS
IN THE MAJOR NOVELS
OF
HENRI BOSCO

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INTRODUCTION

Readers of Bosco soon discover that they are entering a world where the visible and the invisible exist side by side and where reality meets the fantastic. Jean Lambert has called him "Un voyageur des deux mondes".¹ To one of these worlds belong the colourful descriptions of the Provençal landscape with its sunshine and soundness of life, and to the other belongs the night with its mystery and intrigue. It is the difference for Bosco between the outer, visible world on the one hand and the inner world of the mind on the other.

These two worlds exist for example in Malicroix, the one represented by the cosy Mègremut settlement with its orchards and beehives in the hills of Les Puyreloubes where the family lives out its ordered life, and the other by the tiny island in the Camargue constantly given over to the whims of nature and the mysteries of the night. There is a line of demarcation, a "frontière",² which has to be crossed to pass from one world to the other and in this case it is the great watery masses of the Rhône. Martial Mègremut crosses it to take up his inheritance on the island and at once enters its secret world where the night and its happenings reign supreme. Once there he learns that according to the terms of

¹ For notes see end of chapters

Cornélius Malicroix's will he must spend the next three months there, without leaving, before he can take full possession of the property. So the river acts as a barrier to the outer world, and the contrast is made all the more striking when in Part Seven he finally does return to visit the warm, intimate world of the Mégremut clan. But this barrier becomes even more restricting when Martial reveals his life-long fear of rivers and their swirling water. It becomes a double barrier because he could not cross it by himself if he wanted to.

Similarly in Le Bas Théotime there is a barrier between the solid world of the Théotime farm and its inhabitants and the menacing threats of the neighbouring Clodius farm. This time it is a line of stones, tall enough to be visible when the crops are at their highest, which has been placed there by the careful Alibert who has a great belief in the "sainteté des bornes agricoles".³ It is on this line that the threatening figure of Clodius stands, watching, when he emerges from the shadows of the trees in which his house is situated. When Pascal Dérivat enters his sanctum in the loft and closes the door behind him so that nobody else might enter, another barrier is created, this time between him and the outside world. He goes to this room in the attic, which he calls the heart of the house, to work at his plant collections and becomes engrossed in a world of his own where people and objects of the past are brought to mind. The immediate world for the time being is far from his thoughts.

In L'Ane Culotte the frontier is the stream which divides the secure world of the Saturnin household and the village of Péirouré from the magical, unfamiliar world of Belles-Tuiles in the hills. In Hyacinthe it is not so much a physical barrier which separates the two houses, but just a stretch of the wild plain with a track running across it.

Once these barriers have been crossed it is not just a simple matter of crossing back into the familiar world to return to the shelter of its security. Once the sanctity of the frontier line is broken, the mystery of the beyond will increasingly permeate and trouble the hitherto undisturbed world from which the adventure has been taken. When Constantin in L'Ane Culotte returns from the hills where he has visited the earthly paradise set up by Cyprien - a journey forbidden to him by his grandmother - the steady Saturnin household becomes more and more involved in the strange happenings occasioned by this and subsequent visits. Finally the household begins to break up - Hyacinthe disappears for the first of several occasions, Constantin is sent away to stay with "les cousins Jorrier" at Costebelle for three months, and then he and his grandmother go away for a length of time while she convalesces. The final event in this chain of disruption is when Hyacinthe disappears altogether.

It is the narrator-hero of each story who bridges the gap between the two worlds. He is the one who enters and returns from the beyond, bringing its mysteries back with

him. But it becomes increasingly clear that the other characters are not at as much liberty. In Bosco's scheme of things certain characters belong on one side of the frontier line and some to the other :

Le choix des acteurs sur la scène humaine de Bosco est accordé à ce double aspect de la terre; d'une part les bons et sages bergers et les laboureurs, créatures heureuses qui jouissent de son inépuisable générosité; d'autre part, des êtres hostiles et menaçants qui correspondent à ses manifestations néfastes.⁴

Bosco has drawn up this world with its two-sided aspect and has apportioned the role of his characters accordingly. From this evolves the important role he has entrusted to the feminine characters for in his works one group of them belongs to the sunny, substantial world of Provence, firmly entrenched in its familiar way of life, and the other to the fleeting world of the night full of visions and dreams. This thesis is an attempt to examine this major division in the feminine characters.

* * * *

Investigation of the major works of study on Bosco to hand indicates that, while the two types of feminine characters and their special roles have certainly been noted, no study as yet seems to have been devoted to this aspect of his work. Jean Lambert talks of "les femmes fatales" and "les sewiteurs maîtres"⁵ and Michel Barbier recognises the importance of the "démon féminin", even calling the characters who embody this description the "héroïnes" of the story.⁶ Jean-Cléo Godin has pursued both these ideas in his major study on Bosco,⁷ and has recognised Lambert's classifications in doing this. In

the light of what has been written before, then, this study will aim at substantiating this concept of the two types of feminine characters.

In doing this it does not claim to be a comprehensive study of the feminine characters of Bosco's works, but rather, restricts itself to the "major novels". Probably in the end the decision about which are the "major novels" of an author resolves itself into being a personal preference on the part of the critic. However, recent critics who have been able to view the whole range of Bosco's work generally agree that the period beginning with L'Ane Culotte (1937) and ending with Un Rameau de la Nuit (1950) is an important one in Bosco's development as a writer. It is during this time that Bosco establishes his own and now much-admired technique, the one for which he will most probably be remembered. Michel Barbier speaks for many when he sums up what is for him the true Bosco :

Pour nous le vrai Bosco est celui des grands romans du mystère et de la solitude: la trilogie d'Hyacinthe, Malicroix, le Mas Théotime, Un Rameau de la Nuit. C'est là que l'écrivain a donné le meilleur de lui-même, qu'il a délivré le chant unique que tout vrai poète porte en lui.⁸

The present study, then, while drawing from most of the works of Bosco, restricts itself for any detailed investigation to these six novels. In them, many of the characteristics of the women portrayed before or after this period of thirteen years can generally be found.

A chapter has been devoted to assessing the character of Tante Martine who featured much in Bosco's childhood and whom the author subsequently included as a character in his books. To do this, use has been made of the books written for children and published in Gallimard's "Bibliothèque Blanche" series, and of the "souvenirs d'enfance". This study of Tante Martine is placed at the beginning because it is intended to follow up Jean-Cléo Godin's suggestion that she is the model on which the housekeepers of note in Bosco's novels are based.⁹

Notes to Introduction

- 1
Jean Lambert, Un Voyageur des deux Mondes (Paris, 1951)
- 2
See J. Lambert, op. cit., pp. 35-39, and Jean-Cléo Godin
Henri Bosco: Une Poétique de Mystère (Montréal, 1968),
pp. 185-189.
- 3
Le Mas Théotime (Paris, 1952), p. 57
- 4
Anne Wertheimer, "En Quête du Paradis Terrestre",
Cahiers du Sud, 294 (1949), 266.
- 5
J. Lambert, op. cit., pp 69, 84
- 6
Michel Barbier, Symbolisme de la Maison dans l'oeuvre
d'Henri Bosco (Aix-en-Provence, 1966), p. 119
- 7
J.-C. Godin, op. cit., pp. 211 ff., 254 ff., 281 ff.
- 8
M. Barbier, op. cit., p. 119
- 9
J.-C. Godin, op. cit., pp. 21, 211.

PART I

THE FORCES OF SECURITY

CHAPTER I

THE FIGURE OF TANTE MARTINE

"Tante Martine est entrée plus tard dans ma vie, je veux dire entrée pour ne plus jamais en partir, sauf pour aller là où fatalement chacun va, un jour, et d'où personne ne revient ... "
(Un oubli moins profond, p.231)

In the solitary life that was Henri's Bosco's when he lived as an only child with his parents at the "Mas-du-Gage", there remained one figure with whom he could identify himself : Tante Martine. She took the place of any companion, provided the affection that would otherwise have been lacking in this household, and played no small part in creating the challenges and mysteries that figured so largely in his childhood. In Le Renard dans l'île the retrospective Pascalet, who is Bosco himself, asks: "Qu'eussent été mon enfance et le 'Mas-du-Gage' sans la présence de cette figure tellement vivante..."¹

Henri Bosco moved with his parents from Avignon to this isolated house in the country at the age of three. Tante Martine joined them there four years later, summoned by Bosco's father who felt the need of "une femme d'âge" in the house: "Ça vous rend sérieux et on y apprend toujours quelque chose."² In fact she was not an aunt at all but a distant cousin elevated to the rank of an aunt because

"elle avait dans le sang une vraie nature de tante
... On n'imaginait qu'elle eût pu jouer d'autre rôle."³

A new phase in Bosco's life began with her arrival and ended four years later when she died. Such was the impact of this woman on the young Bosco that J.-C. Godin can justifiably claim that these four years spent at the "Mas-du-Gage" in her presence were the best of his childhood.⁴ This being the case there is little wonder that she was to play such an important role in his writings.

* * *

Tante Martine appears as a character in four of the five novels written for children (L'Enfant et la rivière, Le Renard dans l'île, Barboche in which she plays a major part, and Bargabot.⁵) These books, no matter how fanciful their tales may be, have as their background Bosco's childhood and life in the Provençal countryside and as such are semi-autobiographical. Taken chronologically they loosely follow one another to form a sequence, le Renard continuing where l'Enfant left off, and Barboche drawing on several elements of le Renard to create some of its mysterious happenings. By Bargabot Tante Martine has died and only remains, along with other important figures of the three preceding books, in the memory of the thirteen year old Pascalet.

Of his "souvenirs", the first volume entitled Un oubli moins profond provides us with the most valuable material on Tante Martine recalling as it does his

childhood from the age of six to ten years when she figured so largely in his life. She appears also from time to time in the three further volumes of his "souvenirs" to date,⁶ often in connection with her now famous proverbs. Another volume of his works, Antonin,⁷ which was originally published as a novel is now usually classed with these "souvenirs d'enfance" as the author himself admits to doing.⁸ We can assume that Tante Clarisse, as she explores the house from attic to cellar to find its hidden passages and secrets in keeping with descriptions of Tante Martine elsewhere, is in fact a direct representation of her. Bosco has just changed the name.

Appearing in these nine books, Tante Martine becomes a familiar figure to the constant reader of Bosco. The author realises this and in Un oubli explains why he has used her character so much: "Si je l'ai évoquée si souvent, c'est que j'en aime la figure."⁹ But, as this thesis will attempt to show elsewhere,¹⁰ the importance of this figure is not so much in the mere representation of it in the books quoted above, but in the fact that it becomes the prototype for a series of feminine characters in Bosco's works. It remains therefore to discuss the main characteristics of Tante Martine as derived from the works in which she appears and then to relate these to other feminine characters of Bosco's work.

Bosco is the first to agree that he may have introduced a slight fictional element into the character of Tante Martine and suggests that something may have been lost by doing this.¹¹ But the personality we come to know through reading these books is a colourful yet recognisably human one and there is little doubt, as R.T.Sussex noted when the true Tante Martine was finally revealed with the publication of Un oubli, that "The real person is very close to the fictional."¹² There is such a diversity in her make-up that she lends herself easily to becoming a character in fiction. This woman, in her sixties when Bosco knew her, had retained a lively interest in life and possessed a youthful exuberance with which she approached everything she did. A "campagnarde", she had lived most of her younger days near to the soil and then spent her time moving from one Bosco family to the other, from town to country, as she was needed.¹³ This was apprenticeship enough for the role of housekeeper and guardian that she was to fulfil in her final days at the "Mas-du-Gage".

In carrying out these duties Tante Martine shows herself to be very much a two-sided character, as much at home in the every-day world of her domestic chores as in the fanciful world of her dreams. It is her special quality that these two sides of her nature do not impede one another, but combine to render the other more worthy:

Tante Martine ... une femme qui savait rêver et travailler en même temps, sans sacrifier son travail à ses rêves ni ses rêves à son travail. C'est pourquoi ses rêves semblaient raisonnables et son travail avait la légèreté des songes faciles.¹⁴

It is this combination of the practical and visionary worlds in her make-up that renders this character so attractive and from which stem many of the qualities which she has bestowed upon the other characters who are portrayed in her image. Being a practical woman, she is saved from the tedium that could result from her chores by this vivid imagination. Much of her day was spent working hard at these household jobs, ensuring that everything was always spick and span, and yet what seems so uncharacteristic in such a competent person is that she never saw an end to them. But that was how she liked it, finding satisfaction in being behind, always trying to catch up. Always thinking ahead of what there was to be done, her imagination would start to work, to such an extent that the young author would find her actually talking to these unperformed tasks: "Vous m'agacez, leur criait-elle. Chacun son tour ! ... Vous ferez la queue."¹⁵

Bosco's parents being so often absent, Tante Martine was entrusted with the complete running of the "Mas-du-Gage" and this responsibility was carried out with skill and economy: "cette femme ... remplie de bon sens, qui avec honneur et sagesse administrait notre ménage, et

sou pour sou."¹⁶ The pedlar who visited the "Mas-du-Gage" each week to restock it was often amazed at the way she could estimate the weight of a rabbit for example by just looking at it. To the last farthing she would haggle over the price of a bunch of grapes or a basket of apples to ensure that she did not overspend. But, while she was very careful about what she did spend, the house never went without anything: "Le raisin ne manquait jamais et la pomme était abondante. En somme, elle comptait, mais chacun y trouvait son compte, et même un peu plus."¹⁷

As well, she had a great love and understanding for objects, treating them rather as if they too were alive: "Cette soupière s'embête toute seule sur ce coin perdu du buffet. Plaçons-la sur la cheminée, entre le compotier et la veilleuse..."¹⁸

They are capable of having feelings like any human being, and just like any human being they can lose track of their place in this world: "Qu'est-ce que me fiche là ce coquetier? Il a dû y venir tout seul... Ce n'est pas ta place, va t'en!... Il ne tient pas debout, et il veut être au beau milieu de l'étagère!"¹⁹

When she stands full of disillusionment looking down on her now much changed childhood village of Pierroure, she only finds comfort in once again being surrounded by familiar objects in the little lodge nearby which belonged to Jean Alibert: "Tante Martine se rassérénait. Cette pièce si accueillante, ces objets, cet outil, encore utiles..."

tout contribuait à un assoupissement de sa peine."²⁰

Included in her management of the house was the care of the animals, which she undertook with great authority, and needless to say she was just as strict with the people who surrounded her: "Elle régentait tout le monde: les gens, le chien, les canards et les poules."²¹ Throughout these books Bosco calls her "despotique" or "autoritaire" and he should know for he was the object of most of this discipline. But such was her way of guiding him that he did not find any difficulty in obeying her: "son bon sens avait une telle saveur qu'on lui obéissait avec plaisir."²² Tante Martine is helped to this end by the imaginative side of her nature since the common sense on which she based her cautions was not without a dash of frivolity from time to time. This made it all much easier to take: "au milieu de tant de bon sens ne lui manquait pas ce grain de folie qui, de la marotte à la fantaisie la plus vive, contredit opportunément ce bon sens et le rend agréable."²³

In this way especially, Tante Martine reveals an instinctive ability to place herself on a level which is acceptable to the child and that is probably why the young Bosco was so attracted to her. This ability goes even further when, considering how widely separated by age the two might be, she treats him almost at all times as an equal, and, without any embarrassment, is able to share her secrets and keep him in her confidence. So

the child is able to do just the same, and a special relationship is built up between them based on mutual trust and understanding. This close feeling for one another allows them to share their thoughts and their dreams: "Nos confins avaient tant d'affinités qu'un de mes songes pouvait les franchir pour aller se fondre dans un autre songe inventé par Tante Martine, cependant que les siens pénétraient souvent dans ma vie secrète, pour l'émerveiller."²⁴ Following from this closeness in their relationship, and probably another reason for it, is Tante Martine's natural ability to grasp a situation and to understand things without any unduly long explanation: "Il suffisait de laisser le coeur dans le jeu pour que tout devînt clair sans qu'on l'énonçât clairement."²⁵ So, while living in the imaginary world she creates and at times almost ignoring the people around her, her understanding of them does not lose by this in any way. When Pascalet returns in L'Enfant from his long adventure on the river forbidden to him by his father, she is ready to accept the situation, understanding what has attracted him there. She calls him several unflattering names and then hugs him warmly, and in this way he returns to the security of her and the "Mas-du-Gage's" protection.

We are not surprised to discover that such a person as Tante Martine is bestowed with a wealth of knowledge about life in general. But in keeping with her simple

attitude to life, she chooses to express this lifetime treasury of wisdom in sayings and proverbs which are to be found all the way through the books. This "sagesse proverbiale" ranges from observations on the signs and vagaries of nature and the weather, through to comments on life and human nature in general.

Consider for example:

"Quand il tonne le soir de Sainte-Rosalie
C'est que l'automne aura du vent et de
la pluie.²⁶

This is just a simple observation on nature's ways, but there are more philosophical ones on man's ways:

Tous les hommes lèvent le nez,
Mais la pluie rabat leur caquet.

or:

Tout le monde se croit certain,
Personne ne te dit peut-être.
Si tu cherche à te connaître,
Tu trouveras que tu n'es rien.²⁷

She was not interested in involved philosophical thoughts and it is enough for her that her beliefs could be summarised in these sayings, stored away for future reference when the need may arise to express them. She is not without a certain amount of superstition either, for she has a great respect for signs that may indicate something in store. On her trip to Pierroure she carries with her a "Clef des Songes" to interpret her dreams, and as we all know:

Songes du matin
Avis du Destin.²⁸

Having awoken on the morning of her departure to the

sounds of a donkey braying in her dreams, she is able to interpret this as a sign from above of good things to come. The fact that nothing good does come from this trip makes her come to the conclusion that she will no longer dream, but sleep, and so she leaves the "Clef des Songes" behind as a token of thanks to the Aliberts. But, as the author notes in Mon compagnon de songes, when she slept in her last years she was heard to mumble the name "Gabriel" and this was no doubt her last, long, uninterrupted dream.²⁹ Bosco learnt a great respect for mirrors too through Tante Martine, who believed the devil lurked behind the image to make us forget that it is only an illusion: "une illusion que nous enchantait dangereusement, car, dans ce cas, le diable, c'était nous."³⁰

While she had a certain amount of belief in the stars and fate, it all tended to be mixed up with her simple belief in God. If anyone dropped a piece of bread it was as well for them to kiss it in an act of regret and reverence because:

Le pain de blé que tu pétris,
C'est la chair et le corps de Jésus-Christ.³¹

She is content to hand this part of her life over to the Supreme Being and live a devout life as she thinks fit:

Tu ne sais que ce que tu crois,
Mets ton coeur au pied de la Croix.³²

And that just about sums up her religious beliefs.

Although she did not overlook such things as fate and predestination, she always held strongly to the belief

that there was a simple way out:

Tout ce que tu es est écrit,
Mais tu peux prier Jésus-Christ.³³

She was able to pray easily, whether to her favourite saints or to the Holy Being himself and there is little doubt, as Bosco said, that this voice would be heard.

There were times, especially at night, when forgetting her household responsibilities, she would give full rein to her imagination and for a while she would live in a world of fantasy, with treasured objects and people from the past:

Si, coiffée de piqué, les clefs et les ciseaux pendus à la ceinture, elle dirigeait de haut et de près la maison, distribuait l'éloge et le blâme, grondait, et faisait trembler jusqu'à la volaille... il lui arrivait quelquefois de passer au-delà de ces choses tellement communes et de poursuivre Dieu sait quels fantômes, là où aucun de nous ne voyait rien que des objets inertes, comme dans la cave et dans le grenier. Dans la cave et dans le grenier, dorment les malles délabrées, vieillissent les meubles branlants, pendent les vêtements rongés de mites. Or, c'est au beau milieu de ces friperies poussiéreuses, qu'elle donnait ses rendez-vous à d'invisibles personnages...³⁴

If she has a fault it is that in pursuing these dreams she sometimes overlooks the supervision of her young charge: "Va t'amuser dans le jardin, me disait-elle. Il faut que je range les fripes."³⁵ Then off she would go to her world of the past, bolting the door firmly behind her so that she might be alone with her invisible friends and ancestors. There, rummaging through the old clothes, furniture and portraits she is able to hold

conversations with those long gone. She was never happier than when she could be alone reliving the past in the familiar objects of the attic and cellar. If not searching through these family possessions, she is probing the depths of the house to find a secret corridor or an underground tunnel. This incredible imagination and her actions which resulted from it did not however override her original responsibility to the house and its inhabitants: "Son commerce avec les mystérieux personnages qu'elle convoquait au grenier ne l'empêchait pas de peser et de repeser très exactement les sous du ménage."³⁶

We return full circle then to the original division in her character, to the division between her practical and visionary worlds where her solid earthiness is made more colourful by her vivid and almost childlike imagination. Having lived all her time in a small area of Provence, going from one family to the other, hers may not have been an adventurous life by some standards. But what she had gained is a fulfilment of life of the highest order and few people can boast the qualities that Bosco attributes to her: "sagesse, savoir, endurance au travail, courage aux peines et, par mystérieuses resurgences d'âmes, une puissante aptitude à rêver."³⁷

A dominating personality, we feel that she is very much at one with life, completely in control of situations and accepting those which defy rationalisation. She does not question, but lives the full and satisfying life she leads with enjoyment and zest. And what more

could be asked of life?

* * *

This chapter has attempted to detail some of the characteristics of a single person who figured very largely in Bosco's life and who also emerges as a colourful personality from the pages of his writings. Leaving aside the important role that Tante Martine played in his childhood for a moment, Bosco, the novelist, is attracted to her no doubt by the fact that she was of country stock. It remains a circular problem as to whether it was because of her that Bosco formulated his admiration for the country people of Provence, or whether he came to admire them through his life spent in the countryside and looks back upon her as a shining example. The answer is not important. What is however, is that as a person born, bred, and who had spent most of her life in the country, Tante Martine embodies much that Bosco came to value in the country people of Provence - qualities like simplicity in one's outlook on life, wisdom and fortitude, but who possessed as well a certain intangible element that lent a mysterious side to their natures. Tante Martine had all these, and there is little wonder that when it came to drawing up some of his feminine characters she provided an excellent model on which to base them.

Notes to Chapter I

(For editions of Bosco's works used see bibliography)

1. Le Renard dans l'île, p.19
2. Un oubli moins profond, p. 231
3. ibid., p.229
4. J.-C.Godin, op.cit., p.21, n.20:
"Henri Bosco avait sept ans, environ, lorsque sa grand-mère mourut. Il en aura onze lorsque Tante Martine mourra. C'est donc entre sept et onze ans que l'enfant a vécu les plus belles années de son enfance."
5. Published in the order as they appear: 1945,1956,
1957 & 1958.
6. Le Chemin de Monclar (1962), Le Jardin des Trinitaires
(1966),
Mon compagnon de songes (1967).
7. Paris, 1952.
8. Le Jardin des Trinitaires, p.11: "Ce dernier [Antonin], bien qu'il soit présenté en roman, n'en est pas moins autobiographique. Seules en effet les toutes dernières pages ont été romancées, et fort peu. Mais ailleurs, au long du récit, personnages et événements sont authentiques."
9. Un oubli, p. 229
10. See p.26
11. Un oubli, p. 229: "Ce qu'on aime, on l'aime tant qu'on le romance et ainsi j'ai un peu romancé Tante Martine. Peut-être y a-t-elle perdu ..."
12. R.T.Sussex, Henri Bosco: Poet-Novelist
(Christchurch, 1966), p.150
13. See Un oubli, p. 230-231. In Le Renard (p.16) we learn that Tante Martine had brought Bosco's father up as well.
14. Le Renard, p. 21.
15. Antonin, p. 270
16. ibid., p. 272
17. Le Renard, p. 19

18. Le Jardin des Trinitaires, p. 21
19. Antonin, p. 270
20. Barboche, p. 125
21. L'Enfant et la rivière, p. 23
22. Un oubli, p. 229
23. ibid., p. 230
24. ibid., p. 68
25. ibid., p. 230
26. Le Chemin, p. 36
27. Un oubli, p. 232
28. Barboche, p. 16
29. Mon compagnon de songes, p. 18
30. Le Jardin des Trinitaires, p. 81
31. ibid., p. 216
32. Un oubli, p. 232
33. ibid., p. 233
34. Le Renard, p. 18
35. L'Enfant, p. 29
36. Le Renard, p. 19
37. Un oubli, p. 231