

Jacques Chessex: The Ogre Within

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Jacques Chessex's novel *L'Ogre*, which won the Prix Goncourt in 1973, is the deceptively simple story of a man's inability to escape the crushing influence of his father.¹ Jean Calmet's father, Paul Calmet, is depicted as a veritable ogre who stifles his son's every attempt to be himself, and who seems to read his guilty thoughts. He is "the immense father" and "that other infallible and hateful sun that glowed red, blazed and shone with all its strength" (12). He is almost a force of nature, an excessive, crushing and vital figure who robs his son of his very virility, and who goes as far as to steal Jean's first love from him. The novel opens with the death and cremation of this monster, which produces in the hero a sense of release and freedom. This feeling does not last long, however, for his father seems to reappear at critical moments to punish him for imagined crimes. When he first tries to make love to Thérèse, his father's image occurs to him, suddenly rendering him impotent. The perfect representation of Paul Calmet is the statue that Jean sees one day in Bern: a huge ogre devouring a child while several other children try to escape from his pockets. In the end, reduced to despair and consumed by jealousy of the young man who has become Thérèse's lover, Jean Calmet commits suicide.

One may see the novel as the representation of a classic Oedipus complex.² It may also be interpreted as depicting the guilt and fear produced by a certain Calvinist image of God, for Jean's father is a kind of vengeful, all-seeing deity who can read every guilty thought.³ But whatever interpretation is given to the general thrust of the novel, Jean Calmet is usually seen as a victim who hates his persecutor and who, reduced to impotence by him, commits suicide to escape him.⁴ It is, however, my intention here to show that Jean Calmet is a complex and ambiguous character whose attitude to his father is not just one of hate, and whose suicide is inspired as much by fear of himself as by fear of his father's memory.

It is true, of course, that the hero of *L'Ogre* hates his father and tries to escape from his influence. One reason why he becomes a teacher is because he sees the young as representing freedom and rejection of the kind of authority that he associates with his father. In his eyes, "they were far removed from the

¹ Jacques Chessex, *L'Ogre* (Paris: Grasset, 1973). All references are to the Livre de Poche edition (1975), and all translations are mine.

² For this interpretation, see Pierre de Boisdeffre, "Chronique du Mois," *La Nouvelle Revue des Deux Mondes* Dec. 1973: 667-77; and Robert Deschamps, "L'Ogre de Jacques Chessex: la poésie au service de la psychanalyse," *Présence Francophone* 16 (1978): 153-61.

³ On this interpretation, see my "Jacques Chessex: La conscience calviniste," *Bulletin des Professeurs Français en Amérique* (1987-1988): 173-84.

⁴ See, for example, Anon., "Goncourt: *L'Ogre* de Jacques Chessex," *Le Monde* 21 Nov. 1973: 14; Eric Lestriant, "Jacques Chessex, Goncourt 1973," *Matlulu* 3, 30 (1974): 6, 14; Lionel Mirisch, "Jacques Chessex: *L'Ogre*," *Nouvelle Revue Française* 253 (Jan. 1974): 102-3.

stifling atmosphere of his family" (69). He particularly approves the way his pupils mock the solemn dignity of Bern and its accoutrements of federal power when he takes them there on a trip. He is equally delighted when the pupils stage a sit-in to protest against the school authorities. Thérèse, with her freedom from restraint and her joy in life, also becomes for him the incarnation of everything that is the opposite of his father's repressive authority.

Yet Jean Calmet also admires his father and longs for the protection of a system of authority. He admires Paul Calmet's sheer strength and boundless appetite, and his admiration often becomes love for his father. When Paul Calmet denigrates him, he is filled not just with hate, but with dismay that the man he admires thinks so little of him. He wants to weep and implore Paul Calmet's love: "For Jean Calmet loved his father. He loved him, he loved that massive and watchful force" (13). It is precisely because he loves his father that he is saddened and struck silent by his vitriolic comments, and "He would have liked to cry out to him that he was wrong. That he loved him" (58). He even sees his father (who is a doctor), not just as an ogre, but also as a self-sacrificing healer of the sick who devotes himself to his patients and fights death itself on their behalf. As Jean's mother puts it: "he was a saint" (29), and Jean cannot help but agree.

Paul Calmet's very cruelty becomes a source of pleasure, for Jean Calmet enjoys suffering. As he remembers the martyrdom of his childhood, he assures himself: "I was chosen to suffer. I must resist fear, I must love that suffering"; and we are told he is filled with "the joyful intoxication of an initiate and a victim" (20-1). The enjoyment of his suffering and fear is seen most clearly in an episode from his childhood. His father would pretend in jest to cut his son's throat with the razor that he used to shave himself. The razor thus becomes an obvious symbol of the castrating father. But, while terrified by this game, the child would find a curious thrill in it: "The victim abandons himself and swoons with pleasure" (149). When he is an adult, Jean Calmet tries to refind this pleasure, for one of his chief delights is to go to the barber's and have himself shaved with a razor like his father's.

The same ambiguity may be seen in Jean Calmet's attitude to the Principal of the school in which he teaches. This man clearly resembles Jean's father, for he too is an ogre in whose presence Jean feels guilty, and who, whip in hand, breaks up a student demonstration. He is a god-figure, "the Creator's lieutenant, the God-king, the father of the state" who inspires in Jean Calmet "the same fear as he felt when going to his father's study" (121). Yet Jean admires his man's authority, and is fascinated by the feeling of power that emanates from him. Both his father and the Principal represent security in his eyes. Although he tries to reject their authority, he also longs for it and for the sense of security that it provides. Another reason why he becomes a teacher is that school, with its ordered routine and discipline, is a place of authority within which he feels secure, especially from the presence of his father: "The classes in which he had been, and in which he would be from now on, are refuges against the authority of that father" (43). His attitude to Bern, the Swiss capital and symbol of federal power, also contains a measure of respect and fascination. This is why he chooses to take his pupils on a trip to Bern, a project that makes one of his colleagues say: "Are you going to soak up the federal mystique again?" (168). This

mystique does, in fact, hold some power over Jean Calmet, who has to admit to himself that: "He knows only too well that Bern vaguely intimidates him" (168)

Love for his father and admiration of strength and authority lead Jean Calmet to the point where he is tempted to become like his father, to turn into an ogre himself. As an adult, he imitates his father by acquiring a razor just like his. This act indicates symbolically that he is prepared to become a possessive, castrating male. He actually does become one when he is overcome by jealousy because Thérèse takes Marc, one of his pupils, as her lover. He is here acting like his father, who enjoyed sole possession of his women and exercised unlimited authority in sexual matters. Jean watches Thérèse and Marc together, and exacts vengeance in his own mind by imagining them being devoured by the ogre whose statue they see in Bern. He almost puts himself in the place of the ogre at this point.

Jean Calmet's decision to become a teacher may also be seen, not just as a desire to live within a secure system, but to become part of that system and to exercise authority himself. Although he likes to be with his pupils because they represent vitality and freedom in his eyes, he does form part of a system that imposes its will on them, and he realizes that "Here they were all serving an order that would tolerate no departures from it" (151). He becomes a particularly active part of the system when he reads Marc's Latin translation, a work full of errors that Jean Calmet ascribes to the fatigue caused by his pupil's lovemaking. As he underlines the errors in red, he is, as it were, "correcting" Marc--and the French verb *corriger* carries the same connotations of punishment as does its English equivalent.

The fact that Jean Calmet is a teacher of Latin is also significant. One day, he looks at the figure engraved on a coin, a figure representing Switzerland and surrounded by the inscription "Confederatio Helvetica." The Latin words suddenly appear to him as forming part of the mystique of national authority, of a stable, self-satisfied state and an authoritarian religion. He realizes that Latin is a language of power and prestige and that he uses it to enforce his own authority. It is: "The sacred tongue, the language of power and the indestructible" (205). As he realizes this, he imagines his father mocking him for daring to become part of a language and a mystique of power, for usurping paternal privilege. He has, in other words, dared to try to become like his father.

The most odious form of repressive authority in *L'Ogre* is represented by Georges Mollendruz, the leader of a Nazi group, whom Jean Calmet detests, but whose demented anti-Semitic ravings exercise a certain fascination over him. He allows himself to be invited to Mollendruz's apartment, where he discovers with horror and a strange thrill a collection of Nazi memorabilia and photographs. Despite his dislike of what these articles represent, he finds that he cannot avoid being fascinated by the Nazi banner that dominates the room: "Ill at ease, perspiring, he was unable to escape the blazing red standard" (188). He listens in disgust to Mollendruz's rantings, but he is powerless to get up and leave, and has to admit: "I am turned to stone" (190). Later that night, he has a dream in which his father reappears, embraces him in his ogre's arms, accompanied by cries of "Heil Hitler!" The next day, as he tries to make love to Thérèse, his father's image appears to him, and he is once more impotent. As he leaves her apartment, he meets Bloch, a Jewish friend, and he gives in to the

temptation represented by the Nazis. He greets Bloch with the words: "Dirty Jew" (204).

The visit to Mollendruz's apartment, the encounter with Bloch, and the realization of what teaching Latin really represents, all occur shortly before Jean Calmet's suicide. Obviously he kills himself in order to escape his father and because his despair and jealousy are at their height. However, the temptations to become like Paul Calmet are also at their strongest at this point. It is just as legitimate to see Jean's suicide as an attempt to escape himself and what he fears he may become. He realizes that he is tempted to compensate for his own weaknesses by becoming like his father, and that he wanted to humiliate Bloch in order to forget his own humiliation. He has become an ogre: "Oven-ogre," Jean Calmet thinks. "Mengele-ogre. Mollendruz-bat-ogre. Spineless vampire. Jean Calmet-ogre. And I too, for the sake of revenge. How vile" (212).

By killing himself, Jean Calmet kills the ogre in himself and the temptation represented by his father. But even in death, he proves to be an ambiguous figure, for at this point he falls once again under the influence of this father. He chooses to kill himself with his razor, the symbol of his father's power over him, and he is therefore submitting to his father's castrating influence. In death, he rejoins Dr. Calmet, finally devoured by the ogre he secretly loves. As Jacques Chessex himself puts it, speaking of this novel: "The hero dies because he allows himself to be gobbled up."⁵ However, he is devoured not just by memories of a hated father, but by the tendencies that a loved and admired father represents within him.

⁵ Eric Lestriant, "Gros Plan sur Chessex," *Matulu* 3. 30 (1974): 6