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# François Mauriac (1885-1970) and the Catholic Novel

EAMON MAHER

WHEN ONE thinks of Catholic writers in the twentieth century, the name François Mauriac immediately springs to mind. During his long life and career (he was 85 when he died on the 1 September 1970), Mauriac had constantly underlined his Catholic faith as being at the core of his life's vocation.

Nevertheless, his novels and essays were scathing in their exposition of avarice and hypocrisy among the Catholic bourgeois propertied class to which he belonged. There is also more than a tinge of lasciviousness and evil palpable in some of his favourite fictional creations, a fact that caused several French Catholics to question how one of their own could write novels that portrayed sin in such a seductive light. Mauriac spent much time grappling with the concept of what constituted 'Catholic' literature and stated on more than one occasion that, rather than describing himself as a 'Catholic novelist', he preferred to be considered a 'Catholic who writes novels'. Donat O'Donnell (a *nom de plume* for Conor Cruise O'Brien) captures the type of criticism Mauriac's novels elicited:

The real charge against Mauriac was that his tone, and the images he evoked, suggested a secret sympathy, a connivance with sin, instead of the uncompromising detestation of sin which Catholic critics felt they had a right to expect from a Catholic novelist.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Donat O'Donnell, *Maria Cross: Imaginative Patterns in a Group of Modern Catholic Writers* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1953), p.30.

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## DEMONS AND SPHINXES

At an early stage in his career, Mauriac would realise that the characters that attracted him were not as a rule virtuous. Rather, his preference lay with those who fell prey to temptation, who allowed their fascination with evil to lead them down the path to eternal damnation. He also acknowledged that his own life experience was contained in everything he wrote. Indeed, we encounter the following admission in *Le Romancier et ses personnages*: 'Behind the most objective fiction ... can be found the real-life drama of the novelist, the deep personal struggle with his demons and sphinxes.'<sup>2</sup>

As can be garnered from Jean-Luc Barré's revealing biography,<sup>3</sup> Mauriac had more than a few skeletons in his cupboard, the most notable being his homosexual desires, which may or may not have been consummated. For example, in the latter half of the 1920s, he fell in love with the novelist and Swiss cultural attaché, Bernard Barbey, who regularly visited the Mauriac residences in Paris and Malagar (near Bordeaux).<sup>4</sup> This infatuation put great strain on his marriage and on his perception of Catholicism which, as a result of his puritanical upbringing by an excessively devout mother, was tinged with Jansenism. This particular doctrine is also strongly associated with two of Mauriac's most cherished writers, Racine and Pascal. It posits the view that the gift of grace is confined to a chosen elite who are predestined for salvation. Mauriac did not actually espouse this aspect of Jansenism, but, as Malcolm Scott points out:

2. Edmond Jaloux, *François Mauriac romancier*, suivi de *Le Romancier et ses personnages* (Paris: Éditions Buchet/Chastel, 1984), p.142. (My translation).

3. Jean-Luc Barré, *François Mauriac: Biographie intime 1885-1940* (Paris: Fayard, 2009) and *François Mauriac: Biographie intime 1940-1970* (Fayard, 2010). These two tomes are essential reading for anyone who wishes to gain an insight into the rich life of the Nobel Laureate. Barré lays bare the conflicted nature of Mauriac's sexuality and provides in-depth corroboration of the contentious claims he makes about same.

4. Barré argues that the attraction Mauriac felt for other men did not suddenly reveal itself when he met Barbey. There were several other male acquaintances for whom he displayed feelings that went beyond simple friendship – Jean Cocteau, Daniel Guérin and Jean Banzat are just three of the names mentioned in this regard. Barré notes how even in his later years, Mauriac was capable of becoming infatuated with attractive young males, whom he often equated with angels. The biographer quotes the following famous admission by the writer: 'I am acutely aware of the power exerted on me by physical bodies' (p.57).

[H]e was prone to anxieties that brought him to the brink of the theological pessimism inherent in this theory of grace. One was the view of sexual love as the greatest obstacle to the love of God, irredeemable even within marriage – a notion rooted in Mauriac's own sexuality and given support by Pascal's view of 'holy wedlock' as 'the most perilous and base condition of the Christian state'.<sup>5</sup>

Given that he demonstrated a rather unhealthy distrust of human sexuality, it is not altogether surprising that Mauriac should come to question the compatibility of the novelist's art as depicter of the human passions with his religious principles. Clearly, the novelist cannot avoid the area of sexuality if he is faithfully to reflect existence, and such an undertaking is inevitably going to involve dealing with sin. How does one avoid corrupting readers when one presents sin and sinners in a sympathetic light, as Mauriac often did? Scott points out how Mauriac sought refuge in 'the notion that true representation can never be anti-Christian'.<sup>6</sup>

#### THÉRÈSE DESQUEYROUX

This approach worked better in theory than in practice, however, and in the end Mauriac followed the advice of Charles Du Bos that he should 'purify the source': in other words, he could write about anything he wanted provided he did so with a pure heart. According to Margaret Mein, Du Bos was foregrounding here 'the idea that catharsis, purification of the reader by the work of art and by the artist's approach, could free the novelist from the serious charge of complicity'.<sup>7</sup> The close connivance between the novelist and the (outwardly) monstrous characters to whom he gave life made Mauriac's position somewhat uncomfortable in several ways, as we shall now see in the discussion of what is contestably his best-known novel, *Thérèse Desqueyroux* (1927).

5. Malcolm Scott, *The Struggle for the Soul of the French Novel* (Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 1989), p.184. The translation of the Pascal quote is mine.

6. Scott, p.182.

7. Margaret Mein, 'François Mauriac and Jansenism', in *The Modern Language Review*, Volume 58, No. 4 (October, 1963), pp. 516-23, p. 520.

Published during the inter-war period, *Thérèse* contains several ingredients which could easily call into doubt the writer's commitment to Catholic doctrines. At the time of its composition, Mauriac was undergoing a crisis of faith, which may have been triggered by guilt he experienced with regard to the strong attraction he felt for Bernard Barbey. In the Foreword, the author aligned himself with his criminal heroine, whose heart he would have liked to turn to God. He anticipates his readers' disquiet at his giving life to 'a creature more odious than any characters in my other books'. He admits that virtuous characters do not interest him, whereas he possesses a deep knowledge 'of the secrets of the hearts that are deep buried in, and mingled with, the filth of the flesh'.<sup>8</sup>

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*At the time of its composition, Mauriac was undergoing a crisis of faith.*

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Thérèse, disillusioned with her marriage to a local landowner Bernard Desqueyroux, sets about systematically poisoning him. The attempt fails and the heroine is acquitted in court, largely as a result of her husband's testimony in her failure, motivated in large part by the desire to preserve the family honour. Thinking back on her life on the train journey that will take her to meet her husband for the first time since the trial, Thérèse ponders on why she married Bernard. There were a number of reasons, one being her intense friendship with her future husband's half-sister, Anne de la Trave, and the other being the fact that the land of the two families 'seemed made for fusion' (p. 25). As someone who had 'the sense of property in her blood' (p. 31), this fact that did not leave Thérèse indifferent. In the train, she prepares the confession to Bernard. The first disappointment was her marriage, which did not measure up to expectations. Her distaste for sex contributed to her change of attitude towards Bernard: 'Everything which dates from before my marriage I see now as bathed in a light of purity – doubtless because that time stands out in such vivid contrast to

8. *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, in Gerard Hopkins (trans.), *Thérèse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Modern Classics, 1981), p.9. All my references will be to this edition, with the page numbers in brackets.

the indelible filth of my wedded life' (p. 22). These lines foreground a Jansenist approach to marriage and sexual concourse, further underlined in the following description:

I always saw Bernard as a man who charged head-down at pleasure, while I lay like a corpse, motionless, as though fearing that, at the slightest gesture on my part, this madman, this epileptic, might strangle me (p. 35).

Once she becomes pregnant, Bernard's family view her as being the receptacle for the prolongation of the Desqueyroux lineage. Bernard proudly regards her as 'the woman who bore within her the future master of unnumbered trees' (p. 44). This hypocrisy annoys her intensely. Outwardly religious, they have no qualms about paying their workers poor wages, or tricking local merchants, or criticising their neighbours.

When Anne de la Trave falls helplessly in love with Jean Azévédo, a man who is viewed as an unacceptable suitor by the family (he is a Jew and is rumoured to have had consumption), Thérèse is asked to intervene. The contrast between Anne's grand passion and the humdrum nature of Thérèse's own romantic situation makes the latter increasingly conscious of the void in her life. Eventually, she discovers that the relationship holds nothing like the same attraction for Azévédo as it does for Anne. When it comes to an end, Bernard's family are intensely grateful to Thérèse for her intervention.

But her discussions with Azévédo had left a definite imprint. Here was a man who didn't just look on her as a cog in a family wheel, who listened to what she had to say, appreciated her intelligence. Thérèse began to realise that she and Bernard were poles apart in terms of their ideas and approach to life. Whereas 'She longed to have knowledge of some God' (p. 50), she was surrounded by people who simply used religion for their own purposes. She saw herself enclosed in the 'cage' that was family: 'I felt as though I had plunged into an endless tunnel, that I was driving ahead into a darkness which grew more dense the farther I advanced, so that I sometimes wondered whether I should suffocate before I reached the open air again' (pp. 64-65).

There is little or no meaningful communication between Bernard

and Thérèse. After the birth of Marie, they increasingly go their separate ways. Thérèse becomes fascinated with the local parish priest, a devout young man whom she observes closely during what become frequent trips to church. The family view the priest as far too scrupulous, arrogant even, whereas Thérèse sees him as a mystic. During the Corpus Christi procession one year, for example, she stares at him holding aloft the sacred host 'with that look of suffering on his face', followed by Bernard, who was 'doing his duty' (p. 73). The contrast between someone of genuine spiritual conviction and a man who views religious practice as a mere extension of his role as a respectable landowner and pillar of the Church, convinces Thérèse just how reprehensible her husband is.

Thérèse gives in to the temptation to poison her husband out of a mixture of fatigue and inertia. Bernard walks into the kitchen and Thérèse fails to warn him that he is about to take a double dose of the medicine prescribed for his heart complaint and that contains a limited dose of arsenic. Bernard is violently ill that night. In order to be sure that it was in fact the medicine that made him sick, Thérèse sets about poisoning him. In the end, her attempt fails, as do her efforts to explain what exactly prompted her actions. Consumed with indignation, Bernard tells her that she will stay in Argelouse and only join him for important family occasions in order to keep up appearances. Deprived of the opportunity to tell her side of the story, the criminal reflects remorsefully on the years that lie ahead, with only the pine trees to 'witness the slow process of her suffocation' (p. 85).

After her husband retires for the night, Thérèse happens upon some of the lethal cocktail of drugs she had given him some months previously and contemplates suicide. Not nearly as sceptical about religion as people believe,<sup>9</sup> she issues the following challenge to God: 'If that Being really did exist ... since he *did* exist, let him prevent the criminal act while there was still time' (p. 90). As though in answer to her call, Thérèse hears movements in the house and a member of the domestic staff enters her room to announce the death of Aunt Clara. The fact that Clara was the only person to have ever loved Thérèse unconditionally

9. 'She could not be absolutely sure that nothing and Nobody awaited her' (p. 90) beyond the grave.

brings to mind the concept of the mystical substitution of souls: Clara dies so that her niece might live.

There are times subsequently when Thérèse questions whether she is actually alive or dead, however. Abandoned by Bernard and neglected by the couple with responsibility for looking after her, she descends into a state of vapid lethargy from which she is forced to emerge when a letter from her husband announces that Anne's betrothed and some members of the family will be arriving in a few days to visit. Anxious to see for himself the woman about whom he has heard disturbing rumours, M. Deguilheim has made the visit a condition of the nuptial agreement with Anne. Thérèse, whose corpse-like appearance frightens Bernard, manages to pass the test and the marriage plans are not jeopardised. As a reward, Bernard announces that she can leave Arge-louse once Anne is married and go to live in Paris. He even agrees to accompany her on the journey.

Although they reach some sort of accommodation at the end of the novel, there is still tension between the couple. In a moment of weakness, Bernard asks Thérèse why she tried to poison him. Her explanation – 'I felt that I must get the whole thing over and done with as quickly as possible. I was a victim of a terrible duty. Yes, honestly, I had the feeling that it was a duty' (p. 111) – serves only to aggravate Bernard, who assumes that her only possible motivation would have been to secure all their property for herself. Mauriac's heroine, in the distaste she displays for the sexual act, the antipathy inspired in her by the hypocritical approach to religion she observes in Bernard and his family, the cage-like existence she endures after marriage, the strong lesbian attraction she feels for Anne de la Trave, would appear to have much in common with her creator at this critical period of his life. During an interview with Cecil Jenkins, Mauriac was pushed on his close identification with the novel's heroine and acknowledged:

*Thérèse Desqueyroux* was indeed the novel of revolt. The story of Thérèse was the whole of my own drama, a protest, a cry... And I could well say, even though I have never contemplated poisoning



anyone, that *Thérèse Desqueyroux* was myself.<sup>10</sup>

Putting himself in his heroine's place, identifying so many shared traits, sympathising with her plight while disdaining that of those whom she seeks to harm, most notably Bernard, such an approach was undoubtedly problematic for the Catholic Mauriac, as is pointed out by Malcolm Scott:

Thérèse lacks one vital requirement, without which, in the eyes of the Church, absolution could scarcely be afforded to her: namely, the sense of sin. Her reconstruction of events does not lead to a recognition of guilt: she sees no pattern of criminal intent.<sup>11</sup>

Yet we do get glimpses of a soul that is tormented by the idea of God. For this reason, I would tend to agree with Raymond N. MacKenzie, who wrote:

But to regard *Thérèse Desqueyroux* as either non- or anti-Catholic is to misread it; a more careful reading will reveal it as, on the contrary, a novel saturated in a deep, searching Catholicism, with a challenging and ultimately triumphant vision of a world penetrated to the core with God and grace.<sup>12</sup>

At every critical juncture in her life, Thérèse turns to God in the belief that He alone might open up the possibility of happiness to her. When Bernard asks her why she did what she did, 'she saw a gleam of light, a hint of dawn. She played in imagination with the idea of going back to the sad and secret land – of spending a lifetime of meditation and self-discipline in the silence of Argelouse, there to set forth on the great adventure of the human soul, the search for God....' (p. 109) Her hopes are soon dashed, however, not because God does not forgive her, but because her husband does not possess the sensitivity to understand how his wife was temporarily consumed by murderous intent. When he was composing this novel, Mauriac could see no way

10. Cecil Jenkins, *Mauriac* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965), p.75.

11. Scott, *The Struggle for the Soul of the French Novel*, p. 197.

12. Raymond N. MacKenzie, 'Introduction', *Thérèse Desqueyroux* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 3.

to guide his heroine to the safe harbour of divine love – that would not be possible until *The Knot of Vipers* was published in 1932. His state of mind in the latter half of the 1920s was such that a novel of conversion was beyond his reach.

That said, because its essential concern is with the salvation or damnation of its central character, *Thérèse Desqueyroux* is undoubtedly a Catholic novel, arguably the best example of the genre to have been ever written. Note that its purpose is not to edify or to present a false picture of life. Rather, it seeks to explore the misery of a soul deprived (albeit temporarily – Mauriac was to return several times to Thérèse's plight in subsequent novels) of God's love. It is also a piece of writing that tells us much about the turmoil that was going on in Mauriac's own life at this time. He wrote the following revealing lines in *Commencements d'une vie*.

Fiction alone does not lie; it shines a light into a writer's soul that reveals things that he does not even recognise in himself.<sup>13</sup>

The inspiration of Mauriac's creative writing did not lie, as was the case with Georges Bernanos, in producing the novel of sainthood, but veered more towards the expression of the conflicts and turmoil that lay within himself. His view of Catholicism was tinged with Jansenism - which is evident in his anguished portrayal of sex - and was influenced by his difficulty with family and with bourgeois values. In identifying with the plight of outwardly monstrous characters like Thérèse, Mauriac was not straying too far from the Catholic theology of grace, however, which is open to sinners in the same way as to the virtuous.

13. Mauriac, *Commencements d'une vie*, in François Durand (ed.), *Mauriac, Œuvres autobiographiques* (Paris: Editions de la Pléiade, 1990), p. 67.