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# Lost Souls in Search of the Light

## Two Novels of François Mauriac

EAMON MAHER

THE French Catholic novelist, François Mauriac (1885-1970) won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1952. He wrote when some of the most talented novelists in the world also happened to be Catholic. Apart from Mauriac, there were Georges Bernanos and Julien Green in France, Flannery O'Connor in the United States and Graham Greene in England – all significant writers. Mauriac and Greene shared a correspondence and Mauriac wrote a complimentary introduction to the French translation of *The Power and the Glory*. In it, he observed how different an experience of Catholicism Greene had to his own. In England, Catholicism was a minority religion not weighed down with the baggage of centuries of debates that so divided the French. The struggle between Port-Royal (Jansenists) and the Jesuits was bitter and prolonged. Some time later, during the Enlightenment, there was the clash between the rationalists and the Church, a dispute which pitted faith in opposition to scientific reasoning. The French Revolution marked the end of the privileges of the Catholic Church and inaugurated a radical secular Republican tradition that saw no role for the Church in public life. Mauriac was born into a strongly Catholic family and so he maintained that he didn't have any choice when it came to religion. Greene was a convert to Catholicism and freely chose it ahead of Anglicanism.

While Mauriac is considered a 'Catholic' writer, it is important to determine from the outset what that term means. The English academic, J.C. Whitehouse, wrote of Catholic literature:

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Its *raison d'être* is artistic rather than apologetic or didactic, and it is basically the expression of a personal reaction to human life and a personal vision of it. It is produced by an imagination and a sensibility formed and influenced by a specific faith, which contains concepts of man's nature and destiny. Such writing arises not primarily, necessarily, or even probably, from an attempt to convert the reader to a view, having its origin rather in the portrayal of the imaginative universe of a particular human being.<sup>1</sup>

This analysis applies to Mauriac's view of the novel. He didn't see it as a vehicle for promoting Catholic doctrine, but as a means of exploring the psychological recesses of his characters' minds, many of whom are 'lost' souls struggling for enlightenment. Their quest for self-knowledge is what brings them into contact with the divine, the spiritual. We accompany them on their journey without knowing where it's bringing them. This because, in Mauriac's estimation, the characters have to be free, and the novelist must not interfere arbitrarily in their destiny. In *Le Roman* (*The Novel*), in which he outlines some of his musings about that particular art form, Mauriac observed:

I am only happy with my work when my character resists me, when he rears up against the actions I had plotted out for him. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that all parents prefer the recalcitrant, prodigal son to the well-behaved one.<sup>2</sup>

The sinner will always be more interesting than the just. We will see in our discussion of two of Mauriac's best known characters, Thérèse Desqueyroux (1927) and Louis (*The Knot of Vipers*, 1932), how these prodigals appeal to their creator in a special way. One of the more serious charges levelled against Mauriac by Catholic critics in France was that he betrayed a secret sympathy with sin, a tendency they considered unhealthy. He was also associated with Jansenism, the doctrine or heresy according to which grace is the privilege of a select few who will be saved or damned independently of any act on their part. Mauriac regularly declared his lack of sympathy with this heresy; and yet, as Malcolm Scott correctly

1. J.C. Whitehouse, 'Catholic Writing: Some Basic Notions, Some Criticisms, And a Tentative Reply', in *Modern Language Review*, 73,2, 1978.

2. *Le Roman*, Paris: L'Artisan du Livre, 1928, pp.62-3.

observes, 'he was prone to anxieties which 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.'<sup>3</sup>

He clearly had a problem reconciling his sexuality with his religious convictions. One of his more memorable comments in *Souffrances du pécheur*, quite an anguished essay, was: 'Christianity makes no allowances for the flesh: it abolishes it.' Such an attitude obviously feeds itself into his characters, most of whom are, at best, uncomfortable with their sexuality. Bernanos, his contemporary, was not preoccupied with sins of the flesh. In his estimation, the greatest temptation was spiritual indifference, which he found far more dramatic and grave in its consequences than lust.

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a style that is concise, finely honed, latinistic in its classical precision. He sets most of his novels in or around Bordeaux, where he grew up. The land-owning class there (to which his family belonged) is described as acquisitive, devious and hypocritical. This world of land-owners, who made their money from pine trees and rent, has all but disappeared. France has outstripped Ireland in the speed of the depopulation of the rural landscape. Small towns and villages are becoming deserted by all except a handful of elderly inhabitants. One of Mauriac's gifts as a novelist is to capture what it was like to live around Bordeaux at the turn of the last century. Irish people can relate to the preoccupation with the land by seemingly committed Catholics who see no contradiction between their religious convictions and their lack of honesty. Mauriac is scathing in his attacks on the pharisaic attitude of these people. Because he was of their number, the blows hit more forcibly than if they came from an outsider.

But the novelist is not devoid of tenderness towards his own. There are two characters in particular to whom he was particularly attached, two lost sheep who were at variance with their milieu and back-ground and yet unable to break free completely from its influence. It is to these

that we now turn.

*Thérèse Desqueyroux* is probably Mauriac's best-known novel. The heroine is an example of a Mauriacian character who finds that she is unable to conform to social mores. She is a complex woman who is intelligent and insightful enough to know that what attracted her most to her husband, Bernard, were his acres and acres of pine trees and the proximity of the families' land. She is also a friend of Anne, Bernard's sister, and believes that her marriage will bring them even closer. At no stage does Thérèse attempt to justify her attempt to poison her husband. She doesn't fully understand her motivation. When Mauriac displays sympathy for her, he realises that he is treading on dangerous ground. In the Foreword, he is defensive:

Many will feel surprise that I should give imagined life to a creature more odious than any character in my other books. Why, they will ask, have I never anything to say to those who ooze with virtue and who 'wear their hearts on their sleeves'? People who 'wear their hearts on their sleeves' have no story for me to tell, but I know the secrets of the hearts that are deep buried in, and mingled with, the filth of flesh.<sup>4</sup>

He identified with human frailty – his own limitations as a Catholic were a constant source of anxiety to him. In his Foreword he is already preparing the reader for the story of a woman whose destiny 'is mingled with the filth of flesh'. She is a potential murderess, and Mauriac has sympathy for her. To adopt such a position requires him to reveal to the reader the reasons that prompt such behaviour.

At the beginning we are introduced to Thérèse after her trial for the attempted murder of her husband. She is a feeble, pale woman with a high forehead who seems 'condemned to an eternity of loneliness'. (p. 18) Although the case against her has been dismissed, her father, a local politician, hides himself in case he might be seen in public in her company. He talks to the lawyer as though Thérèse were not there. When she tentatively suggests that she might spend a few days with him in his house, he balks, saying that it is more vital than ever now that she and her husband be seen as a united couple.

4. F. Mauriac, *Thérèse*, London: Penguin Classics, Methuen, 1972, p.9. All references will be to this edition.

And so Thérèse is obliged to return to her husband and reorganise her life. In the train journey to Argelouse<sup>5</sup>, she prepares the 'confession' she will give to Bernard. She goes over the events that led up to her crime. She had wanted to marry Bernard and had pursued him shamelessly. She had property in her blood and was attracted to the wealth and standing her marriage would provide. But the union didn't yield her happiness. Bernard was the country squire, interested mainly in hunting, eating and drinking, in addition to rental profit of course. He didn't have his wife's intellectual prowess and thought little about abstract issues. From an early stage it became obvious to Thérèse that the union was a disaster:

Everything that 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 the indelible filth of my wedded life. (p. 22)

Strong words that indicate that, for Thérèse, purity is despoiled, even within the sacramental bonds of matrimony. We have already noted how Mauriac was tainted with a Jansenistic view of sexuality, a view which saw sexual love as an obstacle to the love of God. Thérèse sees that the problem lies not so much with her husband as with herself and her view that life is extending in front of her like 'an endless tunnel, that I was driving ahead into a darkness that grew more dense the further I advanced, so that I sometimes wondered whether I should suffocate before I reached the open air again.' (pp. 64-5)

Her frustration is further exacerbated by the news, received at the end of their honeymoon, that her close friend and sister-in-law, Anne, has fallen in love with Jean Azévédo. On reading Anne's letters giving a passionate account of this romance, Thérèse compares it to the sterility of her own relationship with Bernard. She gives a graphic description of their love-making:

Nothing is quite so severing as the frenzy that seizes upon our partner in the act. I always saw Bernard as a man who charged head-down at pleasure, while I lay like a corpse, motionless, as though fearing that,

5. Argelouse is the property of Thérèse's Aunt Clara where the heroine liked to spend her summer holidays when she was young. After their marriage, she and her husband continued to spend a good deal of time there.

at the slightest gesture on my part, this madman, this epileptic, might strangle me. (p. 35)

While this description is in ways both colourful and amusing, it does betray a distrust of the flesh and a distaste for all that pertains to the sexual act. She sees Bernard as a beast in the throes of passion: 'a madman, an epileptic'. To think that their marriage has legitimised such behaviour!

In addition to the sexual duties, her marriage also imposes other responsibilities. The family asks her to intervene with Anne, to convince her that an affair and possible marriage to a consumptive Jewish degenerate was a waste. The family unit is sacrosanct and the individual will have to concede to collective reasoning. Thérèse, on Anne's request, meets with Azévédo who speaks to her about Paris and the life he leads there. He listens to Thérèse's opinions (something which Bernard never does) and recognises her intelligence. A few months into her first pregnancy, Thérèse is gratified, even slightly embarrassed, by the attentions

of this young man. It could be around this time that the seeds of her future act are sown.

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There was a lack of intensity in the life of the heroine, as becomes apparent as she goes back over why exactly she attempted to poison her husband.

It all began the day of the fire in the nearby forest in Mano. On a hot sultry day, Bernard, somewhat distracted by the weather and the fire, comes into the room and takes two drops of the arsenic mixture he has been prescribed for his heart. Thérèse realises that he had already taken his dose but: 'She said nothing, partly because she was too lazy to speak, partly, too, no doubt, because she was tired.' (p.74)

There was nothing premeditated in her inaction. She was sleepy and distracted, too tired to speak. That night, Bernard got very ill and when the doctor came, Thérèse neglected to tell him about the extra drops. She was embarked on a course over which she would have no control. Like one of Dostoevsky's characters in the throes of evil, there is no logic to her decision to systematically poison her husband. We observe her action with some sympathy. Bernard is obsessed with himself and with his position in the local community; he is lacking in sensitivity towards

his wife and is arrogant and opinionated. She realises that it is unrealistic to expect understanding and forgiveness from a man so convinced of his virtue.<sup>6</sup> Sure enough, when she reaches Argelouse, after the trial, instead of being given the chance to explain her actions, she is forced to listen to her husband judging her. That night, after he has finally stopped talking, she is left alone in her room where she considers suicide. She decides to lay down a challenge to God:

If that being did exist ... since he *did* exist, let him prevent the criminal act while there was still time. Or, if it was his will that a poor blind soul should open for itself a way to death, let him at least receive with love the monster he had made. (p. 90)

Note the change in the language from the doubt of 'if he did exist' to the certainty of 'since he *did* exist': this appears to hint at a sort of conversion. As if her prayer is answered, she is interrupted in her planned suicide by the news of Aunt Clara's death. A prayer answered? It would appear so. The idea of the substitution of souls recurs in the next novel we will examine, *The Knot of Vipers*. Mauriac would argue that a person like Thérèse is as deserving of God's mercy as anyone else – and so she is. She is prepared to look upon herself frankly and to accept her weaknesses. God's love is not confined to the just. When, at the end of the novel, Bernard asks her why she tried to poison him, she is at a loss for words:

'What I wanted? It would be a great deal easier to tell you what I didn't want. I didn't want to be forever playing a part, to go through a series of movements, to continue speaking words that were not my own: in short, to deny at every moment of the day a Thérèse who....' (pp. 111-2)

She stops speaking when she observes that Bernard is not listening. He reckons that she wanted rid of him so that she could have exclusive ownership of their estates. This is why at the end he leaves her on the

6. Malcolm Scott (*The Struggle for the Soul of the French Novel*, op. cit., p.196) notes the train journey to Argelouse is a mirror of the interior journey she makes into the depths of her character and that 'it does nothing to lighten her burden of despair, for her proposed confession (to Bernard) is a secular one, unable to provide the relief of its sacramental counterpart.' After all, 'Bernard is not a priest; the absolution she craves cannot come from him, but only from God, through the mediation of the Church'.



pavement in Paris. (He made the concession to allow her to live in the capital after Thérèse agreed to play the dutiful wife in front of Anne's fiancé, a certain Deguilhem, a man who meets with the family's approval.) She thinks with some excitement about what lies ahead of her. There is a slight hope that she will find happiness in Paris: the light she seeks is dim but there is a glimmer.

#### CONVERSION

Mauriac came back to Thérèse in other novels (especially *The End of the Night*) in an attempt to convert his heroine, but she resisted all such attempts. For the novel of conversion, it is necessary to wait until 1932 and *The Knot of Vipers*. If *Thérèse* expresses Mauriac's Catholicism at crisis point, this crisis came to a head within a short space of time. Malcolm Scott reveals that in the years preceding the publication of *The Knot of Vipers*, Mauriac underwent a most difficult period that was marked by several clashes with his critics. He also accused Christianity of being an impracticable religion, demanding all, and underrating the flesh. Finally, he appears to have had a destabilising relationship with either a woman or a man. He would later say: 'I was like a madman during this time.' Scott observes: 'From Thérèse Desqueyroux, saved because "she knows not what she does", to the characters of the 1930s novels, saved by their uncompromising awareness of their wretchedness, there is a radical leap.'<sup>7</sup>

Louis, the hero of *The Knot of Vipers*, is certainly aware of his 'wretchedness' and does his best to purge himself by writing a diary in which he chronicles the points in his life when he felt most disconsolate. A highly successful barrister, he is putting his 'case in order' before he dies. His desire is to let his wife, Isa, know how he felt at what he perceives to be his marginalisation by the family. Known as the 'old crocodile', he delights in making his wife and children stew with regard to how he plans to dispose of his large fortune after his death. He is a source of scandal to the other members of the family because of his refusal to attend religious ceremonies. He eats meat on Fridays, a practice forbidden by the Catholic religion for many years. His primary purpose in life, now that he has become old, is to make those around him suffer. First on his list is Isa, who, he realises shortly after their union, only married him because of

7. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

the failure of a previous engagement. For the short time that he had believed himself to be the object of his wife's affection, life had assumed a dimension which, until then, he had never known:

An intense feeling suddenly came over me, an almost physical certainty that another world *did* exist, a reality of which we know only the shadow.<sup>8</sup>

This other world is removed from his vision by his conviction (later to be disproved) that he was not loved by his wife, that he came in a poor second best to her first fiancé. He thus set about wounding her where she was most vulnerable: by decrying her pious attachment to religion. He figures that religion is merely an alibi for his family, a social ritual devoid of spiritual significance. He notes in his diary:

Those who oppose you in religion have, really, a very much nobler idea of it than you realise, or than they realise themselves. Why, otherwise, should they be so affronted at the way in which you debase it? (*The Knot*, pp. 50-51)

The first person narrative, in addition to the intimate nature of the diary form, give us a special insight into Louis' character. It is clear that many of his objections to Catholicism are based on what he perceives to be the debasement of religion. This is why the death of his daughter, Marie, to whom he was genuinely attached, makes him wonder why his wife, the Christian, was incapable of detaching herself from the young girl's corpse. 'It was I, the unbeliever, who realised, as I looked at what remained of Marie, the full meaning of the word "remains". I was overwhelmed by a sense of departure, of absence. She was no longer there.' (p. 99) In her feverish state before death, the young girl kept on saying: 'For Papa! – for Papa!' (p. 98) Here we once more encounter the idea of the substitution of souls – a strange concept. Does Marie die so that her father can be reborn? That is a question that no one can answer with certainty.

The death of Isa, many years later, marks the end of Louis' hatred. Before leaving for Paris, where he is set to meet his bastard son to whom he will offer all his wealth, Isa pleads with him to stay. He notes an 'indes-

8. *The Knot of Vipers*, London: Penguin Books, 1985, p. 38.

cribable weariness' in her features. When he accuses her of having always put the children first, she retorts:

'My children! Do you realise that when we took to having separate rooms, I never, for years and years, had one of them to sleep with me, even when they were ill, because I was always half expecting, half hoping, that you would come!' (p. 136)

He suspects that she may be attempting to trick him and so he leaves. The children, although they knew, through contact with their illegitimate brother, of the whereabouts of their father in Paris, do not let him know about Isa's illness for fear of betraying their plans. They have struck a deal with their half-brother who is willing to settle for a fraction of what his father is planning to give him. So they ignore their mother's constant calling out for her husband. (This fact is related to him when Louis returns home having uncovered the cowardly sell-out of his inheritance by his bastard son.) Such indifference to a dying woman's wishes reveals to Louis that: 'The knot of vipers was outside myself! ... They had wriggled free of me and twined themselves into a tangle, into a hideous circle.' (p. 137) The knowledge that his wife would never read the pages he had written, that there would never be an explanation between them, meant, however, that his bitterness was dead. He also discovers in the remains of letters she had been burning during her last days that Isa had been jealous of the relationship between her sister, Martinette, and Louis. Though he did not know it, he had been the love of her life:

Like a dog barking at the moon, I was held in thrall by a reflection.  
Fancy waking up at 68! Fancy being reborn at the very moment of my death! (p. 177)

The transformation in Louis' character would have been spectacular if we hadn't been witness to the many alterations in his emotions as he came towards a reconciliation, firstly with himself, then with his family, and finally with God. He accedes to a state of calm which heralds his final conversion: 'But I was conscious only of a deep sense of peace. Stripped of everything, isolated, and with a terrible death hanging over my head, I remained calm, watchful and mentally alert.' (p. 186) At this stage, he has handed over everything to his children who will, he knows,

find no happiness in their gains. He spends his last months contemplating the different moments when he was visited by grace but was unable to answer. There was Marie's death, his intuition of the presence of God close to him, his anger at the lack of genuine intensity and conviction in his family's religious practice, his disgust with the lowliness of his own character. He notes:

I have always tried to find some way of losing the key which a mysterious hand has invariably given to me at the great turning-points of my life. (p. 199)

Janine, his grand-daughter, who spent the final days of his life with him, is the only one who sees his spiritual reconciliation. His children, especially Hubert, the eldest son, find a posthumous justification for their actions in the diary. Their father had been plotting to deprive them of their inheritance and so they had been obliged to react in order to stop him. Hubert sees not a trace of genuine Christianity in his father's account of his life. Janine reports that her grand-father 'was weighed down by a sense of unworthiness' (p. 206) and she asks in a letter to Hubert:

'Doesn't it occur that your father might have been quite a different man if only *we* had been different? ... The real misfortune for all of us was that he took us for exemplary Christians.' (p. 207)

This captures the essence of Louis' problems with religion. He was looking for an authentic path to God and he couldn't reconcile that with the smug, self-satisfied hypocritical Catholicism that he saw all round him. His religious testimony is persuasive for many reasons, but especially because he moved from intellectual scepticism to a deep accommodation with the Divine. Gene Kellogg says:

Louis is not so much a villain who reforms as a victim who forgives. ... Mauriac shows that the pagan Louis is actually a more religious man than most members of the 'religious' family whose prey he is.<sup>9</sup>

The movement in his character is from self-knowledge to self-acceptance to the acceptance and understanding of others. There is no sudden

9. G. Kellogg, *The Vital Tradition: The Catholic Novel in a Period of Convergence*, Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970, p. 47.

change; rather, it is a gradual movement which gathers momentum as we turn the pages describing the life of a sinner who is the beneficiary of divine grace. Thérèse Desqueyroux met grace and possible conversion but she recoiled at vital moments. Nevertheless, she is an important link in Mauriac's development of a theory of grace that does not exclude sinners. He wrote in *Le Romancier et ses personnages* that Thérèse and Louis,

as distasteful as they appear to many, are free of the one thing I detest above all else in the world and which I have difficulty enduring in any human being: complacency, a feeling of self-righteousness. They are far from happy with themselves, they know their own misery.<sup>10</sup>

'Knowing your own misery', accepting yourself as you are, warts and all, are essential ingredients in attaining a deeper and more dynamic spiritual life. Thérèse plumbs the depths of anguish before she can bear to look on herself without loathing. Her itinerary is a spiritual awakening in many ways but she stops short of taking the steps that might lead to God. Louis goes that extra step and reaches the blissful acceptance of his sinfulness, an acceptance that opens the door for grace to enter into his soul. But one should not be fooled that such a movement towards the light is an easy one. Louis remarks that what he dreads most about death is 'the feeling that to die is to become nothing' (p. 70). It is when his mind is at its clearest 'that the temptations of Christianity most torment me. It is then that I feel it impossible that a way does exist in me which might lead me to your God.' (p. 108) He sees Christianity as a 'temptation', a 'torment' and in this he is joining a long mystical tradition which asserts that the dark night of the soul precedes the joyful light of the revelation of God's presence.

The strange cocktail of good and evil present in Mauriac's characters is not far removed from what constitutes the human condition. Thérèse and Louis are far from perfect in a religious or metaphysical context. Their distinguishing feature is their capacity to view themselves with brutal honesty. This revelation of their inner selves allows them to advance towards a light that glimmers and shines but is never fully grasped.

10 *Le romancier et ses personnages*, in Edmond Jaloux, *François Mauriac romancier*, Paris: Éditions Buchet/Chastel, 1984, pp. 117-8.