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## Pondering Eternity in a Stifling Rural Setting: François Mauriac's *Thérèse Desqueyroux* and John McGahern's *The Barracks*

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**Pondering Eternity in a Stifling Rural Setting: François Mauriac's *Thérèse Desqueyroux* and John McGahern's *The Barracks*.**

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People might justifiably be sceptical at the validity of comparing two authors who are separated by language, social class and culture. François Mauriac (1885-1970), elected to the *Académie Française* in 1937, Nobel Laureate in 1952, was born into a well-to-do Catholic bourgeois land-owning family from the Landes district near Bordeaux. His future as a writer was assured from the moment he submitted his first collection of poetry, *Les Mains Jointes*, to Maurice Barrès in 1909, who predicted: '*Votre carrière sera glorieuse/You will have a glorious career.*' It was, of course, an accurate prediction. Mauriac went on to publish a vast array of highly acclaimed novels, essays, poetry collections, as well as being very active as a journalist. He is closely associated with the genre commonly referred to as '*le roman catholique*' or Catholic Novel, of which he was the most famous practitioner, along with Georges Bernanos and Graham Greene. This is a very different background to that of John McGahern (1934-2006), who was the first-born child to a Garda sergeant father and a primary school teacher mother and whose youth was spent in the western counties of Leitrim and Roscommon. The death of his mother when he was only ten years of age would leave an indelible mark on the young boy. The woman's fervent wish was that John would one day become a priest, but with the passing years he became alienated from organised religion and opted for literature as his life's vocation instead. We read in *Memoir*: 'Instead of being a priest, I would be the God of a small vivid world.' (McGahern 2005, 205)

The publication of his first novel, *The Barracks*, in 1963, brought a very favourable critical reaction but the second novel, *The Dark*, was banned on its publication in 1965 for allegedly containing material with the potential to corrupt public morality. The role of the Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, who intervened directly to ensure that McGahern be dismissed from his job as a primary school teacher after the banning, was an indication of the power of the Catholic hierarchy at the time in Ireland. Samuel Beckett, on hearing about the young writer's plight, was willing to organise a protest, but McGahern refused, saying that it would give the affair too much importance. Instead he chose to emigrate for a time to England before coming back to settle permanently in Leitrim with his second wife, Madeline Green, in 1970. He remained there until his death in 2006.

I supply these short biographies in order to briefly situate the two authors and to give readers an idea of how different their experiences and social circumstances were. Whereas Mauriac was very conscious of Catholicism as a guiding force in his life and suffered when accused of overemphasising the sinful nature of Man in his fiction, McGahern, who lost his faith in early adulthood, chose to depict characters who were undoubtedly Catholic but who didn't reflect deeply on what being Catholic actually meant. Their main concern was with eking out a living from their small farms, going to Mass and the Sacraments, surviving as best they could with the limited resources at their disposal. Mauriac's Catholicism was a central element in his life, and his characters often betray some of the author's doubts and apprehensions about issues surrounding faith. The main difference of approach between the two writers lies in the intellectual engagement with religion that is strong in Mauriac and almost completely absent in McGahern. The latter stated once in an interview with Julia Carlson:

The amazing thing is that it's [Ireland] a Catholic country and that nearly all the writers are not Catholics. They're lapsed Catholics. I think that the Church in Ireland was peculiarly anti-intellectual, say, compared to the French Church. People like Mauriac or Bloy could have no place here. It was a simple world of the GAA and the drama society with a very distorted view of life.

Nobody actually took any time to understand what to be Irish was. There was this slogan and fanaticism and a lot of emotion, but there wasn't any clear idea except what you were against: you were against sexuality; you were against the English (Carlson 1990, 63).

This type of negative reinforcement had a lot to do with Ireland's position as a fledgling state that was only coming to terms with its independence from British colonial rule. Catholicism was a means of distinguishing ourselves from the coloniser, a kind of cultural identity badge if you will. The Catholic Church's dominant role in the newly formed state was cemented by a close relationship with the political leaders and its heavy involvement in health and education. Fintan O'Toole has argued that Catholicism in Ireland had long been a nationality as much as a religion. He notes:

The words 'Irish Catholic' did not denote merely a person of a specific faith born in a specific country. They also had come to stand for a country, a culture, a politics. Catholicism in Ireland has been a matter of public identity more than of private faith. For most of its history, the Republic of Ireland was essentially a Catholic State, one in which the limits of law and of behaviour were set by Church orthodoxy and the beliefs of the Catholic bishops (O'Toole 1997, 15).

Contrast this to a country like France where, since the Revolution, there has been a strong Republican tradition, one that sought to curb the power of the Church and to keep it at arm's length from anything to do with politics. The separation of Church and State was formally ratified in 1905 and France's active secular wing ensures that there are no breaches of this law. In order to feel authentically French, therefore, did not, and does

not, imply in any way being Catholic, to the same extent as in Ireland. In fact, at the time when Mauriac wrote his most famous novels, the years between the two World Wars, many of his compatriots had become dubious of the existence of an all-loving God in the face of the carnage and suffering that they had witnessed first hand in the trenches or heard about from family members and friends. This disillusionment is best captured by the World War I veteran Louis-Ferdinand Céline, who, in his masterpiece, *Journey to the End of the Night*, wrote:

The biggest defeat in every department of life is to forget, especially the things that have done you in, and to die without realising how far people can go in the way of nastiness. When the grave lies open before us, let's not try to be witty, but on the other hand, let's not forget, but make it our business to record the worst of human viciousness we've seen without changing one word (Céline 1997, 28).

There is a desire expressed by Céline in this passage to restore one of the major casualties of the Great War, Truth. His novel is a debunking of the mythical heroism and glory that were long associated with wars and his emphasis is on the mindlessness and absurdity, the futile sacrifice of life, the horror and pain that are the hallmarks of such conflicts. It should come as no surprise that existentialism came to the fore in France during the '*entre-deux-guerres*' period, at a time when the population was demoralised by the huge loss of human life and the apparent absurdity of the human condition. Ireland's experience of the Great War was never as immediate or decimating as that of France.

Having highlighted these important historical differences, I am now going to discuss one novel by Mauriac and McGahern in order to illustrate their depiction of how two of their female characters face up to the prospect of eternity – their reactions will be determined to a large extent by the social milieu in which the two women live. We'll

start with Mauriac's most famous depiction, *Thérèse Desqueyroux*. From the outset, the bordelais novelist knew that by describing the failed attempt of his heroine to poison her husband, and by displaying sympathy with such a criminal soul, he was treading on dangerous ground. He tries to allay some of the anticipated anger in his Foreword:

Many will feel surprised 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 the flesh (Mauriac 2005).

Clearly, virtuous people don't supply the novelist with the same amount of scope as those whose hearts are 'mingled with the filth of the flesh.' The task of exploring what motivated *Thérèse* to systematically poison her husband is rich in psychological possibilities. The novel opens in the aftermath of her trial for attempted murder, a crime for which she has been acquitted, largely as a result of her husband Bernard's testimony. Bernard was anxious above all else to ensure that the family name would not be besmirched by having a convicted criminal in its fold. Hence his decision to cover up the truth about what really happened to him. Now, as she travels home to meet her intended 'victim' for the first time since the trial, *Thérèse* goes over in her mind the reasons for her action. She is lucid about the attraction she had felt for Bernard, in large part a result of his possessing acres and acres of pines – she has property in her blood – and is frank about her determination to marry him. On her wedding day, however, she knew that she had made a terrible mistake: '*Thérèse* realized she was lost. She had entered the cage like a sleepwalker and, as the heavy door groaned shut, the miserable child in her reawakened.' (Mauriac 2005, 47) The problems began when she was faced

with the prospect of sexual concourse. ‘As when, before a country scene pouring with rain, we imagine to ourselves what it looks like in the sunshine – thus it was that Thérèse looked upon sensuality.’ (Mauriac 2005, 48) She got no pleasure from their love-making and felt soiled afterwards. Her husband’s obvious enjoyment contrasted starkly to her own bemused indifference: ‘Nothing separated us more than his delirium; I’ve often seen Bernard sink himself entirely in his pleasure – and me, I played dead, as if the slightest movement on my part could make this madman, this epileptic, strangle me.’ (Mauriac 2005, 49)

Thérèse’s loss of her virginity coincides with her changed reaction to her husband and his family. The fact that her pregnancy, announced shortly after returning from honeymoon, is greeted with such joy by Bernard, only increases her sense of frustration and isolation. The future birth of their child is ultimately about continuing the family line and has nothing to do with love: ‘And he gazed with respect on this woman who carried within her body the future sole master of innumerable pines.’ (Mauriac 2005, 57) His family were even worse, in Thérèse’s eyes. They ‘venerated me as a sort of sacred vessel, the receptacle of their progeniture; there’s not a doubt that [...] they would have sacrificed me for that embryo. I was losing all sense of my individual existence.’ (Mauriac 2005, 80) When she does give birth to a baby girl, Marie, her maternal instincts are muted to say the least: ‘She didn’t want Marie to resemble her. She wanted to have nothing in common with this flesh detached from hers. People started saying she lacked maternal feeling.’ (Mauriac 2005, 82) Her antipathy towards Bernard is heightened by what she views as his hypocrisy: ‘She can remember loathing her husband more than usual on Corpus Christi day, when she watched the procession through the half-closed shutters. Bernard was the only one walking behind the canopy.’

(Mauriac 2005, 83) His motivation is a desire to be seen as an upright Catholic: in Thérèse's words: 'he was performing his duty'.

Having traced the reasons why Thérèse began to despise her husband, Mauriac then subtly unveils her unconscious decision to poison him. There are no rational reasons for her doing what she did: 'she was engulfed in the abyss of her crime; it had breathed her in.' (Mauriac 2005, 84) Mauriac's refusal to condemn his heroine, his obvious sympathy for her plight, caused many of his Catholic readers to feel uncomfortable. The novel becomes really interesting when the heroine and her husband meet again in the residence of her Aunt Clara, Argelouse. Clara is very fond of her niece and spies through the keyhole as Bernard lays down the law as to how they will proceed in the wake of what could have been a shameful scandal. Thérèse is afforded no opportunity to explain her actions and, reflecting on her fate, she observes the pine trees in the distance that are 'like an enemy army'. 'These wardens, whose piteous complaint she could hear in the wind, would watch her languish through the long winters [...]. They would be the witnesses of her long suffocation.' (Mauriac 2005, 94) She knows now that she will live out the remainder of her life in the seclusion of Argelouse. After the interview with her husband, upstairs in her room, Thérèse contemplates taking her own life and pleads with God to intervene. She utters the following prayer:

If He exists, the Being (and she saw again the impressive Corpus Christi procession, the solitary man crushed under the cope of gold, and the thing he carried in his two hands, and his moving lips, and that air of sorrow) – then let Him stop my criminal hand before it's too late. (Mauriac 2005, 99)

She pours the lethal dose of chloroform into the water but before she can take it, she hears a commotion and a servant rushes into her room to announce that Aunt Clara has



died. Is this a miracle or mere coincidence? There is no way of knowing. Thérèse stares into the abyss that is eternity and then draws back from the edge. Could this be an example of a substitution of souls? Aunt Clara dies so that Thérèse can be saved? These are the sort of questions that recur frequently in Mauriac's novels. Sometimes, it is the sinners like Thérèse or Louis, the hero of *Le Noeud de vipères* (*Nest of Vipers*), who appear to possess more genuinely Christian qualities than the self-righteous Catholics who surround them and whose poor example turns them away from religion. Mauriac stated unambiguously why he was attracted to characters like these in his essay *Le Romancier et ses personnages* (*The Novelist and his Characters*):

[..] as distasteful as they appear to many, they 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 not happy with themselves, they know their own misery (Mauriac 1984, 117-118, my translation).

'Knowing your own misery', accepting your faults, these are essential ingredients of any mystical quest. In spite of the lack of sustenance for her spiritual longings within the confines of conventional religion, Thérèse manages nevertheless to attain some sort of accommodation with God towards the end of the novel. After an absence of some months, her husband announces that he is to return to Argelouse where he and his wife are to be visited by his sister Anne, formerly a close friend of Thérèse, and her fiancé. The latter, aware of the rumours surrounding the trial, wants to assess for himself what skeletons might be in the family closet. He is satisfied by the show of unity he witnesses and resolves that the marriage should go ahead. Bernard, horrified at the deterioration in his wife's appearance, proceeds to attack the domestic staff for their neglect of his wife and stays at Argelouse to nurse her. As a reward for her performance in front of Anne's

betrothed, Bernard releases Thérèse from her sequestration and agrees that she can go to live in Paris. He accompanies her to the capital, where for a brief moment, on the pavement of a Parisian restaurant, there is a slight hope of reconciliation between the couple. Bernard asks Thérèse what her motivation was for poisoning him and this prompts some optimism in her soul: '[...] now she seemed to perceive a light, a kind of dawning, and she imagined a return to that secret, sad country: she imagined a whole life of meditation, of perfecting herself in the Argelouse silence, an interior journey in search of God...' (Mauriac 2005, 119) The possibility of some sort of outlet for her spiritual quest is dashed when her explanation that she 'gave in to a hideous sense of duty' is met by absolute incredulity by Bernard who is convinced that she hoped to get all the property in the event of his death. The moment passes and she is left alone to contemplate a life of independence and perhaps adventure in Paris.

Mauriac, the fervent Catholic, thus produces quite an ambivalent novel from a theological point of view. We are not given any real indication as to what the future holds for Thérèse. The search of God that she considered possible if she secured her husband's forgiveness seems to fade into the background once he rebuffs her explanation. We can see her attachment to religious rituals is genuine, but that those who, like Bernard, use religion for their own selfish purposes fill her with disgust. She therefore seems to be left in a spiritual no-man's-land, with no obvious resolution to her problems.

The fate of McGahern's heroine, Elizabeth Reegan, while displaying some similarities, is quite different to that of Thérèse. While also trapped by her marriage to a widower with three children, Elizabeth doesn't dwell in a morbid manner on her sad lot. She is not an educated woman like Thérèse, has no servants to do the daily chores, and

is responsible for running a busy house single-handedly. To add to her woes, she discovers that she is suffering from cancer, which, as a former nurse, she senses to be terminal. The novel traces the course of the illness from the original diagnosis through a mastectomy until the heroine ultimately succumbs to its ravages and dies. So while we are talking about a very different itinerary from that of Thérèse, it is in their reaction to the prospect of eternity that there is room for a fruitful comparison. Before Elizabeth met and married Reegan, a sergeant in the police force and a veteran of the War of Independence, she had spent years nursing in London where she had a liaison with a doctor, Halliday, who suffered from depression and was prone to anti-religious outbursts. On one occasion, he addressed the following question to her: “What’s all this living and dying about anyway, Elizabeth? That’s what I’d like to be told.” (McGahern 1963, 85)

In many ways McGahern’s work is an attempt to unravel some of the mysteries associated with ‘all this living and dying.’ When she first discovers that she is terminally ill, Elizabeth is reminded of Halliday’s comment. Whereas he dies in a car accident, that is suspected to be a case of suicide, Elizabeth adopts a more stoical attitude to the crosses and injustices that existence throws her way. While sceptical of certain aspects of the Church’s dominant role in the local community, she remains attached to a number of its rituals. Unlike Thérèse, Elizabeth chooses to see beyond the faults and failings of those who use religion for their own ends and thus manages to embrace the ultimate message contained in the Gospel. But she is more than capable on occasion of adopting an independent stance, as can be seen when she refuses the parish priest’s invitation to become part of the Legion of Mary, which she sees as ‘a kind of legalised gossiping school to the women and a convenient pool of labour that the priests

could draw on for catering committees'. (McGahern 1963, 163) She also has a commitment to prayer, particularly the rosary: 'It has grown into her life, she'd come to love its words, its rhythm, its repetitions, its confident chanting, its eternal mysteries.' (McGahern 1963, 220) She acknowledges that her response to it is purely instinctive: 'What it meant didn't matter, whether it meant anything at all or not, it gave the last need of her heart release, the need to praise and celebrate, in which everything rejoiced.' (McGahern 1963, 220) The mechanical droning of the responses to the prayer gives the same type of pleasure and reassurance as a day when the family work together in harmony at saving the hay, or at any other such communal activity. Elizabeth also enjoys visiting the church for some quiet moments of meditation. She doesn't go with a view to asking for her problems to disappear – that is not her approach at all: 'There were no answers... she'd no business to be in the church at all except she loved it and it was quiet.' (McGahern 1963, 165)

Elizabeth's husband is a disgruntled, unfulfilled man who hates having to take orders from a superior officer for whom he has no regard. He didn't fight in the War of Independence to end up being told what to do by a younger officer. There is genuine love between Reagan and Elizabeth, even if they don't communicate at any deep level, and this love is a source of consolation to her as she faces death. Her greatest regret about dying is the thought of being separated from her husband and the beauty of a landscape which, when in the bloom of rude good health, had escaped her attention. Now that she knows she is soon to be parted from it, she really 'sees' it for the first time:

It was so beautiful when she let the blinds up first thing that, 'Jesus Christ', softly was all she was able to articulate as she looked out and up the river to the woods across the

lake, black with the leaves fallen except the red dust of beech trees, the withered leaves standing pale and sharp as bamboo rods at the edges of the water. (McGahern 1963, 170)

When I questioned him about the significance of this scene, McGahern stated: 'When you're in danger of losing a thing it becomes precious and when it's all around us, it's in tedious abundance and we take it for granted as if we're going to live forever, which we're not.' (Maher 2001, 75) Nature is not in any way complicit in Elizabeth's fate, as Thérèse viewed it to be in hers. Rather, it's a soothing presence, as well as a source of nostalgia. While looking out on the countryside from the window of a train as she travels to hospital, the banal sights assume a heightened importance for Elizabeth: 'Trees, fields, houses, telegraph-poles jerking on wires, thorn hedges, cattle, sheep, men, women, horses and sows with their litters started to move across the calm grass.' (McGahern 1963, 112) There is a real incantatory quality to the writing here, a desire to name and to commemorate the banal local scenes. Elizabeth is playing the role of the writer in wording the world, naming things, places and people.

Aware of her impending death, she is acutely aware of the seasons passing. The religious ceremonies mark the different times of the year. The last Christmas meal that she shares with the family assumes a sacramental quality: 'Never did the table-cloth appear so bright as this day... and the meal began and ended in the highest form of all celebration, prayer.' (McGahern 1963, 183) Christmas is followed by Lent, with its stark reminder of the transience of human life: 'Ash Wednesday, a cold white morning, all the villagers at mass and the rails, to be signed with the Cross on their lives to be broken, all sinners and needing the grace of God to be saved, the cross thumbed by the priests on their foreheads with the ashes of their mortality.' (McGahern 1963, 194) Elizabeth sees special significance in the Stations of the Cross: 'She saw her own life

declared in them and made known, the unendurable pettiness and degradation of her own feelings raised to dignity and meaning in Christ's passion.' (McGahern 1963, 194)

At Easter, she ruminates on how the Resurrection and the Ascension 'seemed shadowy and unreal compared to the way of Calvary, it might be because she could not know them with her own life, on the cross of her life she had to achieve her goal, and what came after was shut away from her eyes.' (McGahern 1963, 195) One gets the distinct impression that Elizabeth is sustained in her illness and impending death by her religious faith. As I already stated, she does not seek a miraculous cure or facile comfort from religion. No, she remains lucid (a quality she shares with Thérèse) and strong, aware that to truly know God, one must first of all cross the threshold of death:

It seemed as a person grew older that the unknowable reality, God, was the one thing you could believe or disbelieve in with safety, it met you with imponderable silence and could never be reduced to the nothingness of certain knowledge. (McGahern 1963, 177)

There is a sophisticated philosophy at work here, a high level of both stoicism and self-knowledge. McGahern is adroit at describing the rituals associated with death. As soon as Elizabeth breathes her last breath, the women at her bedside take over: 'the priest and the doctor were sent for, the news broken to Reegan on the bog, the room tidied of its sick litter, a brown habit and whiskey and stout and tobacco and foodstuffs got from the shops at the chapel, the body washed and laid out – the eyes closed with pennies and her brown beads twined through the fingers that were joined on the breast in prayer.' (McGahern 1963, 221-2) After death, everything follows the same pattern that has been observed for centuries, as people arrive to wake the corpse and pay their respects. Sandwiches and drinks are supplied, discussions entered into about the person who has died, the life she led, her illness and death. Two of the guards who work with

Reegan, Mullins and Casey, slip away to the nearby Protestant cemetery during Elizabeth's funeral. Behind them they can hear the dull thud of clay hitting the coffin and they can't help showing their relief:

'It's Elizabeth that's being covered and not me and I'm able to stand in the sun and watch', not able to take the upper hand in their minds til they got the bulk of the stone church between themselves and the grave. (McGahern 1963, 223)

Elizabeth Reegan displays the fortitude and resilience of a woman who accepts her impending death with equanimity. This does not imply in any way that she passively endures her plight but rather that she realises that eventually all life ends in the same way: 'Whether she had cancer or not wasn't her whole life a waiting, the end would arrive sooner or later, twenty extra years meant nothing to the dead.' (McGahern 1963, 72) The biggest difference between this approach and that of Thérèse Desqueyroux is that it is adopted by a woman who has reached some type of accommodation with the business of 'all this living and dying', and leans on her spiritual convictions to help her through her journey towards eternity. In some ways, her itinerary is similar to that of McGahern himself who, although an agnostic, retained a respect for the role Catholicism played in his life. He wrote in *Memoir*: 'I have affection still and gratitude for my upbringing in the church: it was the sacred weather of my early life, and I could no more turn against it than I could turn on any deep part of myself.' (McGahern 2005, 222) This could explain his motivation for organising a very traditional funeral Mass, concluding with a decade of the rosary at the graveside. Mauriac never formally broke with the Church but frequently questioned and agonised over some of its dictates. He excels in depicting his inner torment, both in his novels and essays, to an extent that led Donat O'Donnell to sense that he took delight in it:

The power of transmuting such torment and delight into a communicable form is very rare, and those who possess it will find readers and admirers as long as humanity continues to enjoy tormenting itself. (O'Donnell 1953, 37)

This brief attempt at analysing how two novelists deal with their heroines' attempt to come to grips with the mystery that is eternity will hopefully have cast light on some significant differences, but also similarities that come from the fact that both writers shared a common Catholic upbringing that impacted in all sorts of subtle ways on how they approached these issues. Hopefully, it will also demonstrate the light that is often shed on individual writers and cultures when they are considered in a more international and intercultural context.

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