

1997-6

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### Recommended Citation

Maher, E., (1997) The Search for Authenticity in François Mauriac's "Thérèse Desqueyroux", *The Month* (June), pp.239-43.

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## The search for authenticity in François Mauriac's *Thérèse Desqueyroux*



*'They are not happy with themselves. They know their own misery.'* Eamon Maher explains how, for François Mauriac, this was an essential starting point for his characters' quest for authenticity.

EAMON MAHER

François Mauriac is a name that is immediately recognised by literary cognoscenti and by anyone au fait with twentieth century French Christian letters. Born of well-to-do bourgeois stock in Bordeaux in 1885, his literary reputation was established from the moment he submitted his first collection of poetry, *Les Mains Jointes*, to Maurice Barrès in 1909 who told him: 'You will have a glorious career'. The literary critic's intuition was subsequently proved to be correct. Elected to the Académie Française in 1937, Mauriac won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1952.

Success came quickly to him and yet his writings reveal a spiritual anguish and a constant questioning of his faith. A sincere Catholic himself, he was no less scathing in his attacks on the pharisaic attitude of certain Catholics in his novels and journalistic articles than many of his republican/secular enemies. He aroused anger among some Catholics for his portrayal of the hypocrisy of the bourgeois class for whom religion had more to do with social standing than with any sincere search for the truth.

Authenticity was all-important to Mauriac and many of his characters, especially the ones to whom he was most attached, share with their creator an inability to hide behind a mask, to conform to social mores. *Thérèse Desqueyroux* is a striking example of a Mauriacian character who rebels against the role which is assigned to her through marriage and who turns to crime as a means of possible revenge. When Mauriac displays sympathy for this woman who attempts to poison her husband, he knows that he is treading on dangerous ground. In the foreword of the novel he seeks to explain his position.

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.'

The novelist is already preparing the reader for the story of a woman whose destiny is 'mingled with the filth of flesh', someone who is far from virtuous, who is, in fact, a potential murderess and for whom the novelist has obvious sympathy. The novel opens after *Thérèse's* trial for the attempted murder of her husband. We are introduced to a feeble, pale woman with a high forehead who seems 'condemned to an eternity of loneliness' (p.18). And this in spite of the fact that the case against her has been dismissed. Her lawyer accompanies her to a meeting with her father, a local politician, who hides himself in the shadows for fear of being spotted in public in the company of his criminal daughter. His concern is that the trial may have damaged his political reputation and he talks to the lawyer as though his daughter were not there. When she tentatively suggests that she might spend a few days with him in his house he balks at the idea, saying that it is more vital than ever now that she and her husband be seen to be a united couple.

*Thérèse* thus prepares the 'confession' she will make to Bernard. In the train journey to Argelouse,<sup>2</sup> the country residence where her husband is convalescing, she contemplates the events that led up to her crime. She realises that her marriage to Bernard had been her long-cherished ambition. The estates of the two families were adjoining one another and seemed made for fusion. She had property in her blood and was attracted to Bernard because of his wealth and standing — so her motives were far from pure. But a marriage based on property did not yield happiness. Bernard was your typical country squire,

interested mainly in hunting, eating and ensuring that the estate was making a tidy profit. He didn't possess his wife's intellectual prowess and, in fact, thought very little about any abstract issues. From a very early stage it was obvious to Thérèse that the marriage did not bring her fulfilment:

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

### An endless tunnel

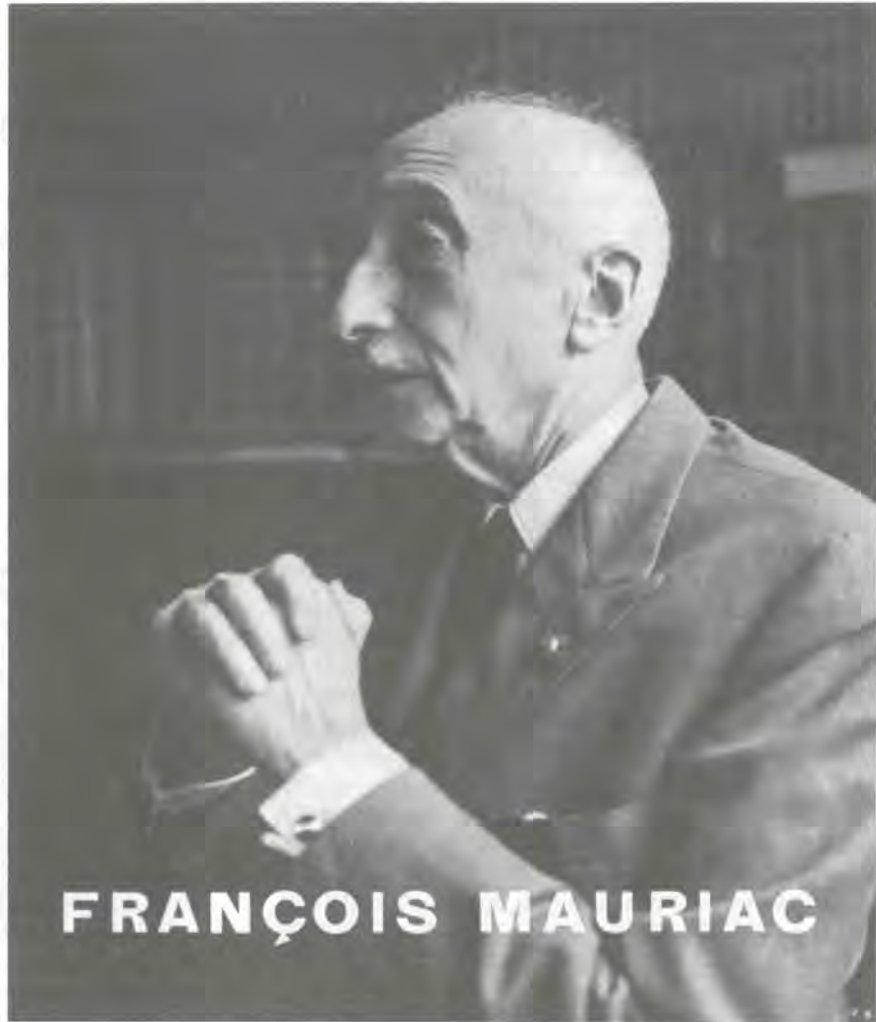
Strong words indeed. The problem lies not so much with Bernard as with Thérèse herself. She feels trapped in a cage from which there seems to be no escape. She sees her life extending in front of her like:

an endless tunnel, that I was driving ahead into a darkness which grew more dense the further I advanced, so that I sometimes wondered whether I should suffocate before I reached the open air again (pp.64-65).

If this were not bad enough, things are further exacerbated by the news, received at the end of her honeymoon, that her great friend and sister-in-law, Anne de la Trave, has fallen in love with Jean Azévèdo. Thérèse, on reading Anne's passionate account of this romance, compares it to the sterility of her own relationship with Bernard. The following is the graphic description she gives of the sexual act:

Nothing is 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, at the slightest gesture on my part, this madman, this epileptic, might strangle me. (p.35).

Mauriac's jansenism is all too apparent in descriptions such as this. Thérèse, as is the case with many of his characters, is incapable of dissociating the flesh from sin. The sexual act is reduced to a type of



animalistic ritual to which she is forced to submit. She sees Bernard as a beast in the throes of passion: 'a madman, an epileptic'. Marriage has legitimised this sort of behaviour. The family ask Thérèse to intervene on its behalf with Anne, to convince her that an affair and possible marriage to a consumptive degenerate of Jewish origin could serve no useful purpose. Respectability and appearances; these were the guiding factors in the life of Bernard and in that of his family.<sup>3</sup> The family unit was sacrosanct, one had to conform to its dictates. Thérèse, on Anne's request, agreed to meet Jean Azévèdo. To her surprise, she discovered that he had no real interest in Anne. He talked to her about Paris, about his literary friends, his life there. He listened to Thérèse's opinions, which Bernard never did, treated her as an equal. A few months pregnant, Thérèse was gratified, even slightly embarrassed, by the attentions of this young man whose life was so different from hers.

The way the family regarded her with respect now that she 'bore within her the future master of unnumbered trees' (p.44), the hypocrisy she saw in all their posturing about Anne's relationship, her pregnancy, her meeting with Jean Azévédo, all these elements must have paved the way towards her decision to poison her husband. She felt as though she were suffocating in the mundane provincial life that she was compelled to lead. Her suffocation included revulsion to the sexual act. Like Madame Bovary she had a romantic addiction to the Grand Passion but, unlike Flaubert's character, hers was an emotional and cerebral non-physical experience. Also, Thérèse possessed an intelligence with which poor Emma was never endowed.

### The first step

Mauriac shows all his sharpness as a psychologist in his description of Thérèse's criminal act. The bulk of the novel deals with the 'preparation' of the confession she will make to her husband. It is here that the catharsis begins. She appears to be even more a victim than Bernard, incapable as she is of controlling the evil within her. Bernard, being something of a hypochondriac, had begun taking arsenic drops for a slight heart complaint. On a very warm and sultry summer's day, when everyone was preoccupied by the fire in a nearby forest in Mano, he enters the room and takes two drops of arsenic. Thérèse notices him doing so and realises that he has already taken his daily dose: 'She said nothing, partly because she was too lazy to speak, partly, too, no doubt, because she was tired' (p.74).

Mauriac is careful to let the reader know that there was nothing premeditated in her inaction. She is sleepy and distracted, too tired to speak. That night, Bernard was terribly sick. When the doctor came, Thérèse neglected to tell him about the drops. She was now embarked on a course of action over which she would have no control. She systematically sets out to poison her husband.

The reader observes her action with a good deal of sympathy. Bernard is obsessed with himself and with his position in the local community; he is lacking in sensitivity towards his wife, is opinionated and arrogant. He represents in Thérèse's eyes not just the suffocation of marriage but also the suffocation of hypocrisy. It is not hard to imagine how difficult it would be for his wife to endure him. His hypocrisy is best illustrated the day of the Corpus Christi procession when Thérèse is disgusted to see him walking behind the canopy. He is almost the only man in the procession and the contrast is stark between the curé, who seems to be in a mystical trance, and

Bernard who is 'doing his duty' (p.73). The words are in inverted commas in the text in order to underline the lack of sincerity in Bernard's behaviour.

Thérèse has her faults, there can be no doubt about that, but at least she has the merit of being able to make critical observations about herself; Bernard worries only about how he is perceived by others. He uses religion as a means of strengthening his feeling of respectability and moral superiority. The heroine realises that it is unrealistic to expect forgiveness from a man as sure of his virtue as her husband is. When she reaches Argelouse, instead of being given an opportunity to explain her actions, she is forced to listen to her husband laying down the law. They will be seen together on certain important family occasions, as social convention demands. He did not testify against her only for fear that it might damage their daughter's future. Their marriage is over but they will keep up appearances.

That night, after her husband has finally stopped talking, Thérèse is left alone in her room where she actively considers ending her life. She lays down a challenge to God:

If that being really 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).

Before she can take the poison which will end her life she is interrupted by the sudden commotion in the house and the news that her aunt Clara has been found dead in her bed. A prayer answered? It would appear so. Some critics maintain that the death of Aunt Clara, who had genuine affection for her niece, is a sacrifice made to save Thérèse, a type of substitution of souls if you like. Certainly, Mauriac would argue that Thérèse is deserving of God's mercy. He admires his heroine's lack of dissemblance, her search for authenticity. She has been dealt a cruel hand in life; she has never really been loved by anyone and this has made her into a monster, a potential murderess, a rebel.

However, through her intense suffering she achieves something approaching happiness towards the end of the novel. Bernard rejoins her in Argelouse after an absence of a couple of months. Anne, cured of her infatuation with Azévédo, is now prepared to marry the man the family has picked out for her, a local landowner called Deguilheim. The latter wishes to meet Thérèse, about whom he harbours some doubts, before the engagement becomes official. Because he has not seen his wife for some months, on his arrival Bernard is astonished at the deterioration in Thérèse's appearance. She has been very ill, due in

part to the neglect of the servants but mainly because of her lack of will to live, the realisation of the evil within her and her inability to fight it.

### Trapped

The metaphor of the cage is very strong in the descriptions we encounter in the sequestration of Thérèse in Argelouse. The heroine is trapped, suffocating without hope. She is even deprived of her one consolation, her cigarettes, because the servants fear that she will set fire to her bed. In spite of her weakness, Thérèse manages to play the role of dutiful wife in front of Deguilhem. As a reward, Bernard allows her to move to Paris after Anne's wedding. One would have expected this move to be a source of great joy to Thérèse. After all, she would now be free to do as she wished, to attend plays, to read, to meet stimulating people, in brief to lead the type of life of which she had been so envious when listening to Azévédou. But life is not as simple as we sometimes imagine. Had Bernard asked her to come back with him to Bordeaux, she would have consented to do so:

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).

God is not mentioned by name too often in this book. However, Thérèse, without being outwardly religious, does invoke him in her hour of need, as evidenced by her prayer prior to taking the lethal dose of poison. Her opinion of religion is jaundiced by her proximity to people who have not even begun to question their beliefs, who live a lie. Mauriac's heroine is turned into a monster by the failure of people with whom she comes in contact to understand or to love her. There is also a strongly developed rebellious streak in her, a desire to shock people out of their complacency, a refusal to conform. 'To thine own self be true'; these words would appear to be a fitting epitaph to this woman's life. She seeks an authentic path and is constantly faced with obstacles and pitfalls. She does not know what answer to give Bernard when he asks her why she tried to poison him. He puts her attempt down to a desire to acquire all their property for herself. It shows how little he knows about his wife. She says:

— What I wanted? It would be a great deal easier to tell you what I didn't want. I didn't want to be for ever 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.112-113)

She sees that Bernard is not going to accept this explanation. For him, everything is cut and dried and he cannot even begin to comprehend the complexity of another human being. But what is worse is the fact that he does not even want to. So he leaves her on the pavement in Paris. She thinks with some excitement about what lies ahead of her. She is ready to commence a new period in her life, a new stage in her search for authenticity in the midst of so much chaos and confusion.

### A terrible duty

*Thérèse Desqueroix* marks a high point in Mauriac's literary accomplishments. In its intensity and drama, it resembles a Greek tragedy. Thérèse is the tragic heroine who embarks upon a course of action over which she has no real control. And yet, through the subtle probings of the novelist into her inner recesses, we begin to see an unhappy and unfortunate woman who attempts to break out of an artificial existence. When she says to Bernard, by way of explaining her foiled attempt to poison him, 'I was victim of a terrible duty. Yes, honestly, I had the feeling that it was a duty...', (p.111) we realise that she has a point, that the motivations of people are obscure and confusing, that the most terrible deeds can sometimes appear justifiable.

The search for authenticity can take on many guises — in Thérèse's case it assumes a very bleak appearance — and yet it is better to question, to search and to rebel than to be indifferent or hypocritical. The other characters of this great novel never stop to ask themselves why they do what they do. They are happy in their artificiality. Thérèse at least has the courage to delve into the dark recesses of her soul and to seek out a more authentic existence.

Mauriac anticipated a bad reaction to his evoking sympathy for a woman who attempted murder. And yet literature contains many examples of this type of depiction. One has but to think of the serial killer Macbeth for whom Shakespeare evoked sympathy, or Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov. The evil person is much more attractive artistically than the good person. Unlike Bermanos, who dared to depict saintly priests and at the same time maintained his reader's willing suspension of disbelief, Mauriac was more at home when dealing with people who were engulfed in evil. He realises that this might seem incompatible with his strong Catholic convictions but, as he says in *Le Romancier et ses personnages* about Thérèse and his other best-known character, Louis (*Le Noeud de vipères*):

(...) as distasteful as they may 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.<sup>4</sup>

'Knowing your own misery', accepting your faults, these are qualities which are essential in the quest for authenticity. And this quest for authenticity; is it not in many ways a seeking out of God? Thérèse plumbs the debts of anguish before she can bear to look on herself without loathing. Her itinerary is in some ways a spiritual awakening but the novelist leaves her when she is on the point of conversion. What is important above all else is the search; what happens between God and his creature is not the domain of the novelist in Mauriac's estimation.

#### Notes

1. François Mauriac, *Thérèse*, Penguin Modern Classics, Methuen, 1972, p.9. All my references will be taken from this edition.
2. Argelouse is, in fact, the property of Thérèse's Aunt Clara, the spinster with whom the heroine liked to spend her summer holidays during adolescence. Aunt Clara was a mother-figure to Thérèse whose biological mother had died when she was very young. After their marriage, she and Bernard continued to spend a good deal of time there.
3. We see from his behaviour after the trial that her own father shares this view.
4. *Le Romancier et ses personnages*, in Edmond Jaloux, *François Mauriac romancier*, Editions Buchet/Chastel, 1984, pp.117-118.

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#### LIVING TOGETHER

With all this living together,  
Is there still love?  
Have you tamed the old monster,  
Made him/her always purr?

With all this living together,  
Is there still love?  
Love the almighty, the breaker of hearts,  
Has life turned up for you a new set of arts?

With all this living together,  
Is there still love?  
Is your response, to say with a shrug,  
Oh, love, don't be taken in, don't be a mug?

With all this living together,  
Is there still love?  
Love, patient scholar of foibles and fads,  
Makers of partners into mothers and dads.  
With all this living together,  
Is there still love?

JOHN BATE