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## A Lost Soul in Search of the Light : Francois Mauriac's "Therese Desqueyroux"

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## Writers on Catholicism

In this series, Eamon Maher looks at one book by an author who was marked by Catholicism

**F**rançois Mauriac (1885-1970) is perhaps the best known of the French 'Catholic Novelists.' Elected to the Académie Française in 1937, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1952. In this article, I propose to explore certain elements of what I consider to be his finest novel, *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, published in book form in 1927.

The period between the two wars in France is notable for the preponderance of high quality literary production, a lot of which was written by authors who also happened to be Catholics. Bearing in mind the concerns Mauriac harboured in relation to the potential of the novel to corrupt, he placed himself in a rather awkward position by choosing as his heroine a woman who attempted to poison her husband. He stated in his Foreword:

'Many will be surprised that I've been able to imagine a creature even more hateful than all the characters in my other novels. They will wonder why I don't depict the sort of character who bristles with virtue and who wears his heart on his sleeve. But those with 'hearts on their sleeves' don't have a story. But those hearts that are buried, the ones deeply intermingled with the mud of the flesh – those hearts are the ones I know.'

The novel opens, in fact, at the conclusion of Thérèse's trial for attempting to poison her husband. She is presented as being a feeble-looking, pale woman with a high forehead, 'damned to eternal solitude.' (p.33) The evidence of her husband, Bernard, was largely responsible for her acquittal due to 'insufficient cause.' He claimed he neglected to count the drops of arsenic he took for his heart condition, whereas in reality he knew he was the victim of his wife's perfidy. He was never going to allow the reputation of the family to be tarnished by having the truth of what happened come into the public domain.

### Spiral of evil

The 'murderous attempt' began on the day of the forest fire near Mano. Fires are a serious matter if you happen to possess several hectares of pine trees, as Bernard does. Thus, when he returned one day harassed with the news that a fire had broken out, Thérèse observed him taking a second dose of the arsenic drops and failed to warn him about what he was doing. Looking back on the episode later, she comes to the view that her inaction was down to 'laziness' or 'fatigue.' That night her husband had a violent fit of vomiting and Thérèse did not reveal to the doctor its

probable cause. She was now embarked on a spiral of evil: 'The act had, during dinner, been within her without her knowing it, and now it began to emerge from the depths of her being – unformed still, but swimming up closer to her awareness.'

In order to be sure that it was definitely the arsenic that was causing Bernard's illness, Thérèse began to systematically double his dose. She had begun to feel revulsion for him shortly after their marriage. The main attraction he possessed in her eyes was the fact that the properties of their families were ideally suited to being merged. 'She always had property in her blood,' she admits, adding that 'she was not indifferent to Bernard's two thousand acres.' (p.45)

On the day of her wedding, everything changed: 'She had entered the cage like a sleepwalker and, as the heavy door groaned shut, the miserable child in her reawakened.' A major problem was her lack of enthusiasm for sex, a duty she felt compelled to endure. Afterwards, she experienced a sensation bordering on nausea and revulsion: '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.' Bernard's outward veneer of respectability (he was a firm supporter of the church and scrupulously attended religious ceremonies) was in stark contrast to his nightly possession of his 'accustomed prey.'

### Distrust of the flesh

Mauriac's distrust of the flesh was fuelled by his Jansenism. He had difficulty dissociating the sexual act from sin. Thérèse saw her husband as a kind of beast in the throes of passion. Marriage had legitimised such bestial activity. On their return from honeymoon, she discovered she was pregnant and this added to her prestige in Bernard's eyes: 'And he gazed with respect on this woman who carried within her body the future sole master of innumerable pines.'

The way the family viewed her as some sort of sacred receptacle because she was going to produce an heir, in addition to her disgust with her husband's hypocrisy, were partly responsible for Thérèse's crime. Bernard was not possessed of the same intelligence as his wife and failed utterly to comprehend why she acted the way she did. The only logical conclusion he could reach is that she wanted to acquire his property.

# A lost soul in search of the François Mauriac's *Thérèse Desqueyroux*

After her acquittal, he awaits her in Argelouse, the house of her Aunt Clara. This is a worse trial than the one endured in court. Without allowing her to speak, he tells her the way they will deal with the potential scandal. They will be seen together at Mass and on family occasions, as social propriety demands, but after a while she will remain on her own in Argelouse, her Aunt Clara's residence.

After Bernard has retired to bed, she stays up smoking and thinking. She imagines how the pine trees outside her window 'would be the witnesses of her slow suffocation.' She sees how her existence will be a living hell and contemplates suicide. Before taking the fatal mixture of poison she has prepared, she issues a challenge to God: 'If He exists, [...] then let Him stop my criminal hand before it's too late. And if it's His will that a poor blind soul crosses through this passageway, may He at least receive this monster, His creature, with love.'

A sudden commotion in the house disturbs Thérèse as she prepares to drink the deadly concoction. Someone rushes to inform her that her Aunt Clara has died. Whether it be chance or divine intervention, the heroine reaches a decision: 'I'll live, then, but like a corpse in the hands of those who hate me. I'll try not to see anything beyond that.'

After a respectable length of time has elapsed, Bernard leaves his wife in Argelouse and brings their daughter Marie with him. The couple responsible for the upkeep of the house soon tire of Thérèse's tendency to burn the sheets with her cigarette butts and her desire to spend days on end in bed. Eventually, the cigarettes are taken from her and she suffers withdrawal symptoms. Her health deteriorates and she catches a severe chill one night when she sleeps with the bedroom window open.

### **Panic**

There is panic when after some months Bernard announces that he will be arriving with his sister Anne's new betrothed, a member of the rich Deguilhem family. Deguilhem is anxious to meet Thérèse before he and Anne marry in order to see the Desqueyroux family skeleton for himself.

Bernard is prepared to release Thérèse – she is to all intents

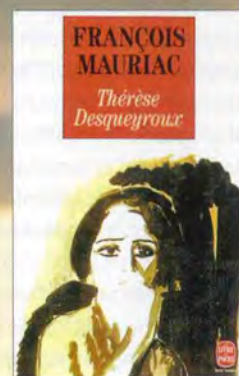
and purposes a prisoner in Argelouse – if she'll play the role of dutiful wife one last time. She summons the strength to allay Deguilhem's fears but Bernard is shocked at her sickly appearance. He stays on after the departure of Anne and her fiancé to supervise her recuperation before she heads to Paris where she will begin a new life. He accompanies her on the journey and then enquires as to the motivation behind her attempt to poison him.

At this point Thérèse believes that she is on the cusp of a new beginning: '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...' (p.119) But the reconciliation with Bernard flounders because of his failure to hear her attempted explanation: "I gave in to a hideous sense of duty – yes, that's what it was like, a duty!"

The moment passes and Bernard, annoyed at his momentary weakness, restores the distance between them. Thérèse is thus left on the terrace of a Parisian café, where she contemplates her newly found freedom.

Mauriac chooses not to pronounce on Thérèse's 'conversion.' Everything is couched in doubt and yet one gets the impression that the heroine, for all her failings, is nevertheless someone who is open to the idea of the transcendent. She accepts her sinfulness, which is not always an obstacle to God's love: 'I have come, not to call the upright but sinners to repentance.' (Luke 5:10, 32) Mauriac's depiction of Thérèse never becomes edifying – her faults are plain for all to see – but he does hint that her very sinfulness is a catalyst in her possible salvation. In theological terms, he is justified in making such a claim, and his novel is a fine depiction of the strange ways that God can sometimes intervene in human existence. ♦

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*François Mauriac's novel, Thérèse Desqueyroux is a fine depiction of the strange ways that God can sometimes intervene in human existence, writes*  
**Eamon Maher**

*light*