

FRANÇOIS MAURIAC AND THE
SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS

by

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INTRODUCTION

Many of François Mauriac's characters seek, throughout the course of his novels, an abstraction referred to as le bonheur or happiness, the definition of which varies from individual to individual and from one situation to the next. Sometimes it is the search for a tangible "something", a particular object that is earnestly desired. The individual assumes that happiness will naturally coincide with the attainment of the desired object. The avarice of the people of the Landes, their unquenchable thirst for money, land and prestige leads many of Mauriac's people to seek a material or measurable basis for their happiness. Others try to find a certain state of being in which they would be content to remain for a long period of time--usually a state of isolation, seclusion, solitude or anonymity--and this forms the foundation of their search for happiness. Often they pursue their object through other people, by trying to love both within and without a marriage framework, but with varying degrees of success. However, all of them try to find something that gives meaning and purpose to their individual lives. It is the struggle toward this goal that allows them to find some degree of the bonheur terrestre in their lives.

The goal sought by the characters of Mauriac never seems to be in the present. It is either based on something that once

existed and has since been abandoned, or it appears to be just beyond one's grasp. This happiness is elusive, transitory and dependent on the things that happen to them, so that they are in some way responsible if they never find it. It is characterized by constant seeking, but is left largely unfulfilled.

Mauriac's personalities act on the basis of a motivation that they do not seem to understand. What is making them pursue this vision of le bonheur? At times they seem to be the victims of some internal mechanism that is goading them to action and that produces dissatisfaction when they do not succeed. Other times it seems to be a willful response to the fundamental human desire of wish fulfillment. They move from one lover to the next, from marriage to separation, from the provincial town to the large city, always convinced that in the future things will be better and that they will, at last, have found this elusive happiness which over and over again they hope to capture. Every time these people are integrated into a new way of life, the sources of their unrest and dissatisfaction reappear, creating more problems and an incessant urge to change.

These are beings who do not know themselves what they want and it is this haphazard, instantaneous pattern of action that breeds their discontent. Their actions are often misdirected because of a certain lack of self-knowledge. Several of Mauriac's novels utilize the flash-back technique in which the chief personage relates a past experience. In the retelling and reminiscence of events and in viewing retrospectively their motives, the characters

do eventually achieve some self-knowledge. However, this glimpse comes only at the end of an apparently meaningless life. For the most part it is only then that they can come to grips with their real desires, for perhaps it is only then that they can endure facing what they have been and succeed in analyzing their actions with honesty.

I would like to show how this search for terrestrial happiness leads the characters to some degree of self-knowledge and to a realization that what they are really seeking transcends the human world as they are reached by God and His grace. I have limited my subject to its expression in nine of the novels of François Mauriac, ranging in order of publication from 1922 to 1951. These novels are: Le Baiser au lépreux (1922), Génitrix (1923), Le Désert de l'amour (1925), Thérèse Desqueyroux (1927), Le Mystère Frontenac (1933), Le Noeud de vipères (1933), La Fin de la nuit (1935), La Pharisienne (1941), and Le Sagouin (1951).

1. INFLUENCES ON MAURIAC'S SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS

In order to understand the characters of a novelist it is frequently necessary to know something about the person who created them, for the author and his characters are, to a certain degree, inseparable. There are five important influences in the life of François Mauriac that are often reflected in the characters and situations of his works.

Most important, Mauriac is a Roman Catholic, influenced by Jansenism, indebted to the works of Pascal and Racine, and bound by choice to a certain region of France. He is a practicing Catholic; yet he insists that he is not a creator of Catholic novels but a Catholic who writes novels. "Mauriac decided to stop writing formally as a Catholic novelist but to aim rather at a simply naturalistic rendering of the world, arguing that this in itself would constitute an 'indirect apology for Christianity.'"¹ He participated in the Catholic Renaissance which had its strongest appeal in the 1920's. He has denounced the religious mediocrity that has come to characterize modern French Catholicism and is concerned with complacency in religion and with the undue concern for worldly matters that he has observed throughout his life. He has often been reproached for his studies that appear to many to

¹ Cecil Jenkins, Mauriac (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1965), p. 5.

be anti-Christian; many even refuse to admit that Mauriac is Catholic. However, he is only trying to present his sincere vision of life--not just the pleasant, easy-to-digest portions, but the unpleasant, scheming, passionate events that are perhaps more characteristic if one is honest in his evaluation. Whether or not one views Mauriac as non-Christian depends on whether one reads fiction as a means of escape, seeking to create a dream world on the margin of real life and concerned more with the sticky-sweet surface of things, or whether one looks for a means of adjustment to this world that is often cruel, often at cross-purposes with our desires. Mauriac portrays life as he has observed it from the viewpoint of a Catholic concerned about his fellow man.

Connected with his Catholic influence is that of Jansenism. The movement developed within the Catholic church in the seventeenth century as a form of reaction against the "pagan", man-centered, free-thinking sixteenth-century Renaissance movements. Hence, in the twentieth century the movement has opposed the modernist tendencies to relegate religion to a second-place importance. It is still a strict movement but, no longer being the center of controversy against the Jesuits that it was in the seventeenth century, it has been toned down and adapted as Catholicism has evolved.²

Jansenism presents a pessimistic view of the world, magnifying the despair of man who is considered corrupt and a victim of

²A historical perspective of Jansenism is given in René Taveneaux, Jansénisme et politique (Paris: Armand Colin, 1965), "Présentation," pp. 7-50.

original sin. "The essential point was that man could be saved only through the grace of God, and that such grace need not be vouchsafed to all men."³ The element of predestination is present in Jansenist thought but the grace of God is, to them, revocable. The focus is on the individual who becomes responsible for his life. Mauriac is concerned with the individual in his society. His Catholicism is an individual interpretation of the faith in order to make it a livable religion for him.

It is precisely the real prospect of reconciliation between God and man, as envisaged by Mauriac, which saves him from identifying completely with the Jansenist doctrine; but such dramatic tension between God and nature as Jansenism conceives must surely attract every man in so far as he perceives his own inner dualism and the eternal struggle for ascendancy between "l'ange" and "la bête".⁴

It is the worth of each person, his actions, his beliefs that have meaning, not the conforming, stifling action of the crowd.

The most outstanding Jansenist writer is, of course, the seventeenth-century essayist and mathematician, Blaise Pascal. Many of the ideas of Pascal made a strong impression on Mauriac, who kept a copy of the Pensées near him at all times. Pascal views man as having a double nature: he is both great and lowly,

³Albert Guérard, The Life and Death of an Ideal: France in the Classical Age (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), p. 194.

⁴Margaret Mein, "François Mauriac and Jansenism," The Modern Language Review, LVIII (1963), 523.

a creature of contradiction and weakness, but nonetheless capable of thought. "L'homme est grand parce qu'il se connaît misérable."⁵ The two main divisions of his Pensées are "la misère de l'homme sans Dieu" and "la félicité de l'homme avec Dieu."⁶ He avows that one must give everything to God--it is for him a question of either total submission or of nothing at all. Man cannot serve two masters but must choose between God and Mammon. Central to the idea of grace is the "Dieu sensible au coeur" series of Pensées in which he proposes that God is found through sensitivity, not by means of the intellect.⁷ One must wait for God and be receptive to Him, for there is nothing one can do to merit His grace. Finally, there are several statements in the writings of Pascal concerning man's search for happiness.

Tous les hommes recherchent d'être heureux. Cela est sans exception, quelques différents moyens qu'ils y emploient. ... La volonté [ne] fait jamais la moindre démarche que vers cet objet. ... Une épreuve si longue, si continuelle et si uniforme devrait bien nous convaincre de notre impuissance d'arriver au bien par nos efforts. ... Ce gouffre infini ne peut être rempli que par un objet infini et immuable, c'est-à-dire que par Dieu même.⁸

Thus, we see that Mauriac owes many of his ideas to Pascal.

⁵Léon Brunschvicg, Oeuvres de Blaise Pascal (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1925), Vol. X, Pensées II, 303, Pensée 397.

⁶Ibid., Vol. XII, Pensées I, 61, Pensée 60.

⁷Ibid., Vol. XIII, 201-212, Pensées 277-79.

⁸Ibid., 321-26, Pensée 425.

Another seventeenth-century author who influenced Mauriac was Jean Racine, master of the classical theater. He, too, refers to the misery of man without God. His characters deliver themselves over to their passions and are destroyed without finding this grace of God that was central to the thought of Pascal. Racine's largest influence on Mauriac was in the area of psychological analysis of his characters.⁹

The final influence is Mauriac's choice of a geographical area of concentration. The aristocratic, aloof, suffocating life of the well-bred families of the Bordeaux area forms the basis for his study of the region. By limiting himself to an area and a certain class of people that he knows well from first-hand experience, he is able to render his characters and their surroundings more believable. By thus limiting himself he can explore more deeply into the motivations behind the actions of these people and show their psychological development.

⁹See Mauriac's La Vie de Jean Racine (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1928) in which he traces the evolution of Racine's religious faith and discusses its relation to his works and literary techniques.

2. THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS IN MATERIAL POSSESSIONS

For the people of the Landes, as portrayed by Mauriac, the possession of material goods is a fundamental basis of life, the reason for which each family exists, and the means by which it hopes to increase its position in the society. Mauriac states the Golden Rule of these people explicitly in one sentence of Thérèse Desqueyroux: "La propriété est l'unique bien de ce monde, et rien ne vaut de vivre que de posséder la terre."¹ Martin Turnell comments on this idea, saying that "The wealthy landowners pay lip-service to religion, but their real religion is the cult of the family, their social position, their pines, their vines, their cash."² This cupidity becomes the only real value for many of these people, who seek through the accumulation of property and money a form of happiness that can never be fulfilled, for each new gain or acquisition only stimulates their desire for more. The importance conceded to this love of material possessions influences the characters of the books to such an extent that this becomes a monster which takes precedence over the other reasons for living.

¹Thérèse Desqueyroux (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1927), p. 80. This novel will hereafter be referred to as Thérèse.

²Martin Turnell, The Art of French Fiction (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions Books, 1959), p. 302.

This valuation is learned from birth. It was said of Thérèse that "elle avait toujours eu la propriété dans le sang" (Thérèse, p. 40). Louis, the hero of Le Noeud de vipères, says, in speaking of his mother, that "son vice, qui était de trop aimer l'argent, elle me l'avait légué; j'avais cette passion dans le sang."³

Wealth and land serve as a bond between generations, an inheritance that is both tangible and intangible: one bequeaths the actual property and teaches the attitude to be taken toward it. Property is something real, a link between past, present and future. The present generation has the duty of conserving these treasures gleaned in the past and of adding to them new acquisitions to be passed along in turn.

There is a source of pride in establishing this reputation of land ownership and family name. Once obtained, it is necessary to think about safeguarding it. In many situations, marriages between two fine, established families came to be the best means of assuring both the continuation of their principles and of augmenting their possessions. The mariage de convenance became the rule rather than the exception.

Thérèse Larroque and Bernard Desqueyroux are faced with this problem. "Tout le pays les mariait parce que leurs propriétés semblaient faites pour se confondre ..." (Thérèse, p. 31). Later

³François Mauriac, Le Noeud de vipères (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1933), p. 72. This novel will hereafter be referred to as Noeud.

his half-sister is not allowed to marry the man she loves because of the family's plans for her:

... si Anne manquait le mariage Deguilhem, ce serait un désastre. Les Deguilhem ne sont pas de leur monde: le grand-père était berger ... Oui, mais ils ont les plus beaux pins du pays; et Anne, après tout, n'est pas si riche ... Il ne fallait à aucun prix au'Anne manquât le mariage Deguilhem (Thérèse, p. 62).

This example and that of Louis, whose "fortune s'annoyait assez belle pour que les Fondaudège pussent consentir à ce mariage et fermer les yeux sur le reste" (Noeud, p. 47), show that even if all was not first-rate concerning the family background of a future son-in-law, the financial aspect carried more weight in the final analysis. Even if there were no other reason for the marriage, this was considered sufficient, as is shown of Jean Péloueyre, the physically repulsive protagonist of Le Baiser au lépreux:

On ne refuse pas le fils Péloueyre; on ne refuse pas des métairies, des fermes, des troupeaux de moutons, des pièces d'argenterie, le linge de dix générations bien rangé dans les armoires larges, hautes et parfumées, des alliances avec ce qu'il y a de mieux dans la lande. On ne refuse pas le fils Péloueyre.⁴

Thus, for mercenary reasons two persons are made to marry, assured

⁴François Mauriac, Le Baiser au lépreux (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1922), pp. 57-58. This novel will hereafter be referred to as Baiser.

by those around them that they should definitely be happy because of the financial situation they have created by merging their resources.

Because of the attention given to this desire for affluence, the worth of the individual is pushed aside. Before the birth of their child, Thérèse and Bernard refer often to the family duty that is theirs--bearing an heir to the property, which was something to be done as quickly as possible. During her pregnancy Thérèse is at last respected by the family and by Bernard, not for her qualities as a human being, but because of the role she is fulfilling.

Les la Trave vénéraient en moi un vase sacré;
le réceptacle de leur progéniture; aucun doute que,
le cas échéant, ils m'eussent sacrifiée à cet
embryon. Je perdais le sentiment de mon existence
individuelle. Je n'étais que le sarment; aux yeux
de la famille, le fruit attaché à mes entrailles
comptait seul.

(Thérèse, p. 104)

It is how this person fits into the general plan that matters.

Similarly, Louis, the protagonist of Le Noeud de vipères, writes to his wife (p. 31): "Depuis trente ans, je ne suis plus rien à tes yeux qu'un appareil distributeur de billets de mille francs."

These two examples of a robot-like husband dispensing money like a stamp-machine and of a fruit-bearing plant about to produce something valuable, show the depersonalization resulting from a way

of life in which money is the foundation of everything.

In this society where happiness is supposedly measurable in monetary form, two of the most financially successful people are among the most unhappy, for they have seen the failure of the system. They find it impossible to submit to this acceptable mode of behavior. Both Thérèse and Louis have found this "pouvoir départi aux créatures les plus chargées de fatalité,--ce pouvoir de dire non à la loi qui les écrase."⁵ Thérèse refers repeatedly to the fact that she is different from those around her, that they have only a vocabulary in common, and, at age sixty-eight, Louis sees that he has spent his life "prisonnier ... d'une passion qui ne me possédait pas" (Noeud, p. 207).

Before Louis has come to grips with himself and sees the futility of this life to which he has dedicated himself, his sister-in-law Marinette has risked the loss of seven million francs by remarriage. He tells her how foolish she would be to do this, "et comme elle prétendait mettre le bonheur au-dessus de tout, je lui assurai que personne n'était capable d'être heureux après le sacrifice d'une pareille somme" (Noeud, p. 99).

Following this, his thoughts wander to the death of his daughter Marie many years before and he begins to think about religion, which he had always denied. He writes to his wife Isa that he has been living through a hell on earth and confesses that

⁵François Mauriac, La Fin de la nuit (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1935), Préface. This novel will hereafter be referred to as Fin.

his heart is a "noeud de vipères." It is at this point that the hail storm occurs where he is in danger of losing much of his property. Then he realizes that he does not really care for these things that he has obtained at the price of alienating himself from his family.

J'ai calculé par habitude: "Cent mille francs perdus" ... mais je n'ai pas bougé. Rien ne m'eût retenu, autrefois, de descendre. ... Mais, ce soir, me voici devenu étranger à ce qui était, au sens profond, mon bien. Enfin je suis détaché.
(Noeud, pp. 130-31)

Later in the book he returns to this idea of separation from the most important part of his life up until this night.

Je voyais en esprit cette fortune, qui avait été, semble-t-il, le tout de ma vie, que j'avais cherché à donner, à perdre, dont je n'avais même pas été libre de disposer à mon gré,--cette chose dont je me sentais, soudain, plus que détaché, qui ne m'intéressait plus, qui ne me concernait plus.

(Noeud, p. 200)

Thérèse, persuaded that she cannot be happy with the Desqueyroux family, has been stimulated by several statements of Jean Azevédo, the young man whom Bernard's half-sister has not been allowed to marry. His intelligence is more of a match for Thérèse than Bernard's singular commitment to eating and hunting. He encourages her to become herself, and not to compromise all her

individuality. She begins to realize that there are other things in the world besides the trees, farms and money she has been taught to value highly. "Qu'importe d'aimer tel pays ou tel autre, les pins ou les érables, l'Océan ou la plaine: Rien ne l'intéressait de ce qui vit, que les êtres de sang et de chair" (Thérèse, p. 184).

She cannot explain this sufficiently to Bernard who is too much a part of the provincial scenery to understand this misfit in his society. He asks her several times why she had tried to poison him and finally in Paris, at the time of their separation, she appeases him by answering: "Ne savez-vous pas que c'est à cause de vos pins? Oui, j'ai voulu posséder seule vos pins" (Thérèse, p. 174). She knows that Bernard will never be able to understand the real reasons for her acts--she has just begun to comprehend them herself. The whole idea that she was suffocating in the stagnant atmosphere, that her individuality had been destroyed, that she could not endure the hypocrisy of the people she had to live with, that she had been enclosed in a mental prison as well as a physical one, could never have been understood by Bernard. But he could believe this explanation of wanting to own all the pine trees, because it is relevant to his own experience. So, to satisfy his curiosity and to allow her to leave in peace, she gives him the answer that he had expected.

This Golden Rule of the Landes is strong but it is also an arbitrary one. Thérèse and Louis eventually choose not to be bound by it. It would have been easier, perhaps, to submit to it and

become an anonymous part of the faceless crowd, but they struggle to be superior to these forces. They cannot reform the system in which they live where the people deceive themselves into believing that they are happy, but they can acknowledge that they have made a mistake and confess: "Je me suis toujours trompé sur l'objet de mes désirs. Nous ne savons pas ce que nous désirons, nous n'aimons pas ce que nous croyons aimer" (Noeud, p. 205). Thérèse and Louis have not been able to find their happiness in material possessions and have freed themselves from this restriction in order to search elsewhere.

3. THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS IN TRADITION

The society of the Landes is based on the maintenance of cultural and familial traditions which together form the stifling atmosphere which creates the settings of Mauriac's novels and against which many of the characters rebel. Whether or not one is allowed to become a part of the system depends primarily on whether one is of the aristocracy. The schoolmaster in Le Sagouin tells his wife: "Nous ne devons pas avoir de relations avec le château. La lutte des classes, ce n'est pas une histoire pour les manuels. Elle est inscrite dans notre vie de chaque jour. Elle doit inspirer toute notre conduite."¹ Entrance into this closed system is based on family history. "Les Cernès ont toujours été respectés et aimés, grâce à Dieu! depuis plus de quatre cents ans qu'ils font du bien ici et qu'ils donnent l'exemple ..." (Le Sagouin, p. 49). It is difficult for newcomers to enter this restricted nucleus of long-established families. Those who marry into a family are perhaps eventually accepted by the others but they are never admitted as equals. "Cette mère, gardienne des derniers Frontenac, et qu'il vénérât à ce titre, demeurait pour lui une demoiselle Arnaud-Miqueu, une personne accomplie, mais venue du dehors."²

¹François Mauriac, Le Sagouin (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1951), p. 130.

²François Mauriac, Le Mystère Frontenac (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1933), p. 22. This novel will hereafter be referred to as Mystère.

It is in the family unit that the laws of the social system are most clearly expressed and enforced. The family is the basis of the society; the individual is of little or no importance. There are certain duties that accompany the right of membership in this family unit. One of them is the sacrifice of individual identity to that of the group.

La famille, c'est-à-dire, des parents, une maison, un passé, un nom et des biens. Entité collective éminemment réelle et tyrannique qui engendre, qui choie, qui enserme puis qui brime et martyrise l'individu, patiemment ou féroce³ment dévoratrice de sa personnalité.³

Thérèse knows that she is unable to fit into this pattern of behavior expected of her. "Les femmes de la famille aspirent à perdre toute existence individuelle. C'est beau, ce don total à l'espèce; je sens la beauté de cet effacement, de cet anéantissement ... Mais moi, mais moi ..." (*Thérèse*, p. 165). Xavier Frontenac assesses the role his sister-in-law is fulfilling in her family. "Il avait parlé des femmes de devoir dont elle était le type. ... [Il] vantait la grandeur du sacrifice, déclarait qu'il n'y avait rien au monde de plus beau qu'une femme fidèle à son époux défunt, et dévouée tout entière à ses enfants" (*Mystère*, p. 11).

The highest duty of each family member is to the collective will of the family.

³Nelly Cormeau, *L'Art de François Mauriac* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1951), p. 141.

By its very nature, however, it tends to be destructive of individuality. Its tradition of ownership and its hereditary patterns of behavior or disease taint human relationships within it, compel each new generation to submit, inflect the individual into conformity with the myth.⁴

The Frontenac family is joined by a bond stronger than death or physical separation. It becomes the duty of the family to preserve this unity after the death of the father. Blanche Frontenac, the mother and primary supporter of the group, is dedicated to the preservation of this unit. "Elle disait 'la famille' comme s'il n'en eût existé qu'une seule au monde" (p. 204). A conversation between Yves Frontenac and his brother Jean-Louis reveals much of the organization of the family and the society.

Ils ne laissent rien au hasard, ils organisent le bonheur de chacun; ils ne comprennent pas qu'on veuille être heureux d'une autre manière

Il ne s'agit pas de bonheur, pour eux--dit Jean-Louis--mais d'agir en vue du bien commun et dans l'intérêt de la famille. ... Non, pas le bonheur; mais le devoir ... une certaine forme du devoir, devant laquelle ils n'hésitent jamais

(Mystère, p. 104)

Jean-Louis had decided to study philosophy, but the family has other plans for him. His uncle and his mother want him to enter the family lumber business. Uncle Xavier is ready to leave the firm and someone in the family must take his place. The fact

⁴Jenkins, p. 34.

that Jean-Louis knows nothing about the business and has expressed no desire to learn does not influence their decision. The enterprise is a family responsibility and because he is the oldest son, Jean-Louis is elected to the position. However, he understands well enough the mysterious power that unites the family to accept the family decision and sacrifice his plans.

In addition to repression of the individual and conformity to the collective will of the family, another duty to be performed is the fulfilling of certain social obligations. These assure the rest of the society that all is well with each family. The religious duty is the most obvious of these social requirements.

"Dans ton monde, un mari 'accompagnait sa femme à la messe'"
(Noeud, p. 48). In many of these families neither the husband nor the wife goes to church for religious reasons. The church serves as a common meeting place where one critically observes his neighbors once a week.

Bien-pensants par tradition, ils sont ponctuels
à leurs devoirs religieux et philanthropiques; on
les voit régulièrement à l'église dont ils sortent
fièrement sans un regard pour Dieu.⁵

Bernard tells Thérèse that it is of the utmost importance that the rest of the people around them believe them to be happily married. Otherwise, if the reputation of the family is destroyed,

⁵
Cormeau, p. 19.

his sister will never be able to marry. They must not break their habits of social appearances.

Le dimanche nous assisterons ensemble à la grand-messe, dans l'église de Saint-Clair. Il faut qu'on vous voie à mon bras; et le premier jeudi du mois nous irons, en voiture ouverte, à la foire de B., chez votre père, comme nous avons toujours fait.
(Thérèse, p. 127)

One of the real crises in this society is the extinction of the family name. Once the name has disappeared, the family itself is gone. There is no regaining what has been acquired over a long period of time, no going back in history to recreate the tradition. The family in Le Sagouin is distressed because of their backward son Guillaume, not out of concern for his physical disability, but because the family name will terminate with him. "Après la mort de Georges, il a été entendu que l'aîné des Arbis, Stanislas, ajouterait le nom de Cernès au nom d'Arbis, comme si il ne restait pas de Cernès en ce monde, comme si Guillou ne s'appelait pas Guillaume de Cernès" (p. 86). Bernard tells Thérèse: "Je regrette seulement que nous ayons eu une fille; à cause du nom qui va finir" (Thérèse, p. 182).

The family name is of great importance to these people. One will do almost anything to keep from losing the honor attached to the name of one of these old families. Bernard tells Thérèse why his family lied at her trial in order to have her acquitted.

"La famille compte seule. L'intérêt de la famille a toujours dicté toutes mes décisions. J'ai consenti, pour l'honneur de la famille, à tromper la justice de mon pays" (Thérèse, p. 126).

These families are eager to get rid of the "intruders" once their spouses are dead or if they have disgraced the honor of the family in any way. It is important not to ruin the family name by allowing these outsiders to remain within the sheltered society of the family. At the time of Thérèse's trial her father is running for office and, afraid that his campaign would suffer from the event, he is pleased that "Elle ne s'appelle plus Larroque; c'est une Desqueyroux" (Thérèse, p. 13). Later, when she is assured of being left alone in Paris, Bernard confides to his mother: "Je ne serai tranquille ... que lorsqu'elle aura débarrassé le plancher. --J'entends bien qu'elle reprendra son nom de jeune fille ..." (Thérèse, p. 169). The baroness in Le Sagouin expresses a similar joy at being relieved of her responsibility for her daughter-in-law Paule. "La vieille baronne se réjouissait parce que ses enfants Arbis auraient Cernès; et puis Paule disparaissait de sa vie. Les Meulière l'avaient recueillie" (p. 145).

The honor of the family cannot be threatened in any way. Xavier Frontenac is horrified at the thought that his nephews might know that he has a mistress Joséfa. He feels that the future solidity of the group may depend on his hiding her existence from the family. However, he is the only one fooled by his efforts.

"Joséfa mesurait, pour la première fois, la naïveté de ce pauvre homme qui avait tout sacrifié à la chimère de sauver la face devant ses neveux; il avait eu honte de sa vie, de son innocente vie!"

(Mystère, p. 211) The silence of the family on such matters must not be broken.

These families refuse to admit defeat. They cling to any vestige of the old ways of life as long as possible. "Appauvris, et presque ruinés, Thérèse s'étonnait qu'ils crussent encore aux préséances" (Fin, p. 35). Whether or not the accepted modes of behavior have any relevance for the present world, they are going to be observed because they have been proven successful for the last century. Once a person is allowed to belong to one of these restricted groups, he becomes the property of the community and subject to its desires. "Elle n'ignore plus aujourd'hui que ce qu'on appelle un milieu fermé, l'est à la lettre: y entrer semblait difficile, presque impossible, mais en sortir!" (Le Sagouin, p. 12).

This atmosphere of tradition and conventionality very soon becomes routine and monotonous for those who are thinking, reacting persons. In order for this system to function properly, it is necessary for those in it to preserve their position by means of the social façade. Many of the characters feel that they are being stifled or buried by this mass of tradition with which they are forced to live. There is a fundamental contradiction between many of the personages and their environment. Those who think that they can be happy in this setting are the "dead" persons, those who have

lost any desire to improve themselves or their society. Those beings who wish to experience another way of life find it difficult to associate with the unimaginative and largely non-thinking group of people who surround them. The accepted manner of behavior in the Landes is directed toward the conservation of a hierarchical, patterned, organized life that is easily subject to mechanization. This way of life is repulsive to many of Mauriac's characters who are more complex and illogical than would be allowed if they were to become completely integrated into the social system. They are emotional, passionate, living persons contrasting sharply with the complacent, equilibrated supporters of the constricted society. Thérèse evaluates her inability to conform to the pressures of the community in the following observation:

Me masquer, sauver la face, donner le change, cet effort que je pus accomplir moins de deux années, j'imagine que d'autres êtres ... y persévèrent souvent jusqu'à la mort, sauvés par l'accoutumance peut-être, chloroformés par l'habitude, abrutis, endormis contre le sein de la famille maternelle et toute-puissante. Mais moi, mais moi, mais moi
(Thérèse, p. 136)

Many of Mauriac's personages discover, at the time of their first objective understanding of their tradition-oriented society, that they do not want the stability offered them in such a situation.

Assujettie, de nécessité, aux réalités matérielles, la famille a contre elle encore de ne pouvoir subsister que par un continuel effort vers l'équilibre, la stabilité. ... C'est ce que les héros favoris de F. Mauriac ne peuvent supporter: appelés "par toutes les routes" ils s'indignent à l'idée de "se fixer." Ils aspirent, non à fonder une demeure sûre, mais à "vivre dangereusement".⁶

The characters find in themselves this need to search, to change. They know that they will never be happy in the static world of the Landes that they know so well nor in the conventional families whose dedication to the past has blinded them to original thought about the present.

⁶Hélène Guénot, "La Famille dans les romans de Mauriac," Nouvelles Littéraires, IX (October 25, 1930), 6.

IV. THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS IN LOVE

A significant characteristic of Mauriac's description of love and family life is his failure to portray a happy marriage in his novels. In speaking with M. Claude Treil, who has interviewed Mauriac, I asked him if, in his opinion, Mauriac has a successful marriage and if this relationship has affected his writing. M. Treil responded that Mauriac does not have a pleasant married life, but that this was his choice and suited his purposes. He described Mme Mauriac as a person rather devoid of personality who serves her husband more as a domestic than as a wife. The two are capable of rapport, but only when Mauriac desires it. However, this situation is well adapted to Mauriac's needs because he wants to be able to remain exterior to his marriage and family in order to devote himself to literature without a conflict of loyalties. He is, thus, more dedicated to his work than to his family.¹

Mauriac's personages expect to find some degree of happiness in marriage. However, since they are not usually allowed free choice of a partner, as discussed earlier, they begin their marriages at a disadvantage. It is assumed that one can tolerate

¹Claude Treil, Personal Interview, Greensboro, North Carolina, March 13, 1968. At present, M. Treil is Professor of French Literature at Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia. He is a native of France, has lived for years in Paris and it was there that he knew François Mauriac.

and even learn to love the person with whom he is to spend the rest of his life. Noémi, before her marriage to Jean Péloueyre in Baiser is assured that "le mariage produit l'amour comme un pêcher une pêche" (p. 57). This attitude, unspoken but present in all these marriages between dissimilar people, supposes that love is something to be learned and that individual preferences and emotions are of no value. What is more likely to be learned is tolerance as one becomes accustomed to and adapts to his spouse. It is possible to make a lasting marriage based on those criteria, but it is not often that such unions are completely happy ones. The combining of a given social system with two individuals will not always yield the desired result and, since divorce is condemned by the hierarchies of both Church and Family, the marriage develops into what A. P. Herbert has called a state of "holy deadlock".²

A fundamental reason for the failure of these marriages is the lack of communication between the members of the families. Primarily, these individuals do not know the persons they marry and, at the end of their lives together, they are still strangers separated by many years of indifference and disinterest. Félicité Cazenave's marriage is described as "cet attachement d'habitude, ce compagnonnage que la mort avait si tôt rompu, sans que la veuve donnât beaucoup de larmes."³ Mauriac's characters tend to simplify

²Quoted in "The Catholics of New York," by Emmet John Hughes, Newsweek, LXVII (March 21, 1966), 23.

³François Mauriac, Génitrix (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1924), p. 114.

one another and to see only limited aspects of the other person. They attempt neither to obtain more than a superficial knowledge of the characters nor to establish any basis for a deeper understanding. After the death of his wife, Louis of Le Noeud de vipères writes that "elle était morte sans me connaître, sans savoir que je n'étais seulement ce monstre, ce bourreau, et qu'il existait un autre homme en moi" (p. 191).

Similarly, as the husband and wife are separated from each other, so are they estranged from the rest of their family. The desert that isolates Dr. Courrèges from his wife also alienates him from his children. His son Raymond is totally unknown to him. The distance between the two is illustrated by the fact that even though they could potentially be united momentarily through their mutual knowledge of Maria Cross, neither tells the other anything about her. The doctor and his son are unable to relate to each other in any way. The Courrèges' daughter and her family live with them, but in spite of this physical presence, they remain isolated from the rest of the family. They are no more concerned with the others than an unrelated guest would be. "Au bout de la table, les Basque s'isolaient, indifférents à ce qui ne les touchait pas, eux ou leurs petits" ⁴

Perhaps because they are constantly together, the members of a family disregard each other intentionally, wishing to remain

⁴François Mauriac, Le Désert de l'amour (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1925), p. 22. This novel will hereafter be referred to as Désert.

apart, unknown and unknowable until they are no longer capable of interaction. "Nos proches sont ceux que nous ignorons le plus Nous arrivons à ne plus même voir ce qui nous entoure" (Désert, p. 171). The family relationship in most of Mauriac's novels is aptly summed up in this image: "L'épaisse prison de feuilles où les membres d'une seule famille vivaient aussi confondus et séparés que les mondes dont est faite la Voie Lactée" (Désert, pp. 119-20). Physical proximity in no way dictates the cohesiveness of a group of people.

One reason for this non-communication between individuals is selfishness. The characters are so engrossed in their own worlds that they cannot give of themselves to form a permanent or meaningful relationship. "Courrèges n'acceptait jamais de souffrir à cause d'un autre" (Désert, p. 11). "[Fernand Cazenave] avait attendu sa cinquantième année pour souffrir à cause d'un autre être" (Génitrix, p. 58). These are creatures who are unaware of any suffering besides their own. They realize that it is painful to become involved with people. Friendships and love cannot be formed without mutual co-operation, esteem and understanding. They do not realize that this happiness that they are seeking might depend on present suffering to produce the future goal.

These people have never known love and live with the reality that they are separated from those they should love. They cannot imagine that these beings whom they do not know and to whom they

do not respond might be capable of loving someone else or of being loved. The father of Jean Péloueyre in Baiser refrains from commenting on his son's approaching marriage because "comme il ne fut jamais aimé, il n' imagine pas que son fils puisse connaître ce bonheur" (p. 41). Mauriac tells us in Désert concerning Mme Courrèges that

bien qu'elle connût l'espèce d'amour qui est de talonner un être inaccessible et qui ne se retourne jamais, son impuissance même à obtenir de lui un seul regard attentif l'avait empêchée d'imaginer que le docteur pût être différent pour une autre femme.

(p. 42)

Mauriac's personages find that they often love someone incapable of returning that emotion. "Nous ne sommes rien pour celle qui nous est tout" (Désert, p. 81). It is impossible for us to choose those we love and to regulate who will choose us. One of the hazards of life is that we must endure other people and support

l'importunité de ces êtres, à qui notre coeur ne s'intéresse pas, et qui nous ont choisis, et que nous n'avons pas choisis!--si extérieurs à nous, dont nous ne désirons rien savoir, dont la mort nous serait aussi indifférente que la vie ... et pourtant ce sont ceux-là qui remplissent notre existence.

(Désert, pp. 97-98)

It is the frustration resulting from this one-sided relationship in which one is loved but cannot respond, that leads Mauriac's characters to search elsewhere for a means of fulfilling their hunger for love.

Noémi Péloueyre is attracted to the young doctor after rejecting the overtures of her husband. Thérèse Desqueyroux, unable to communicate with Bernard, is inspired by the ideas of Jean Azévédo. Louis' wife had been in love with another man before she and Louis were married and the memory of this relationship haunted their marriage for both of them. Raymond Courrèges, after being passionately in love with Maria Cross and rejected by her, is incapable of loving anyone else. His father finds Maria attractive because he lacks a satisfactory rapport with his wife. Fernand Cazenave could not begin to love his wife until she was dead because he was so dominated and possessed by his mother.

Félicité Cazenave had done everything in her power to see that her son's marriage would not succeed because her love for him could not be shared. It was a completely possessive love and no one could have satisfied her as a wife for her valued son. She refers to Fernand as le bien-aimé or l'objet adoré, while her daughter-in-law is called l'ingrat, l'intruse, l'ennemi. Mathilde is the outsider, one who has tried to disrupt the happiness of the mother who had always been in control. It is only natural that Félicité try to destroy any possibility of Mathilde's love for her

son. And she will succeed ultimately in destroying Mathilde herself whose presence is a threat to Félicité's existence. Mathilde is systematically excluded by her husband and she dies convinced that she was never loved.

Another example of rejection is found in Le Désert de l'amour. Maria Cross has two completely different relationships with Dr. Courrèges and his son. With the doctor she has primarily an intellectual and business association. He is officially her physician and treats and advises her. She exchanges letters with him and asks his opinions for her future plans. They are both in need of someone to talk with: she because of the death of her child and he because of his lack of communication with any member of his family. The personality of Dr. Courrèges possesses both emotional and rational aspects. He is able to cover his sentiments well and can become absorbed in his work to replace his lack of personal affiliations. He and Maria have a mature love, a "middle-aged love, far more idealistic and patient,"⁵ but he is soon rejected by her because he bores her.

His son Raymond, conversely, exhibits an adolescent love for Maria--passionate, energetic and demanding. However, this vigorous love is countered by her maternal love that she releases toward him. He has momentarily taken the place of her dead son and becomes an object on which she bestows praise, punishment,

⁵Wallace Fowlie, "Mauriac's Dark Hero," Sewanee Review, LVI (1948), 53.

emotion and finally rejection.

Maria herself is essentially lethargic and non-committal. She is, in fact, incapable of loving. " [Il n'y a] personne qui connaisse moins les choses de l'amour que Maria et qui y prenne moins de plaisir" (Désert, p. 141). She is indifferent toward others and dispenses with relationships when they have served their usefulness for her. She readily alienates herself from those to whom she has been close, terminating the incident for herself, but not always for the other person.

One result of the non-communication between members of families and between friends is that they are ultimately incapable of mutual understanding on the same level. Raymond and his father could never begin a conversation because when one was disposed to do so, the other was invariably occupied in his own thoughts. Dr. Courrèges and his wife go to the garden one night where he wants, for once, to talk with her about Raymond. However, she can speak of nothing but the current problems with the servants. The doctor and Maria are often on two different levels: she is frequently thinking of the practical aspects of a situation while his thoughts wander to the metaphysical. It is this inability to act and react on a common level and the search for some mutual basis of understanding that allows the characters to examine themselves. They begin to realize that they have sought love and happiness in the wrong way. However, by this time the situation is irremediably destroyed either by the indifference, separation

or death of the other persons involved. Nevertheless, the characters through their new comprehension of love are led to a knowledge of Mauriac's concept of Christian love.

In its broadest acceptation, love is the search of human nature for self-realization, a consummation which can only be perfectly achieved when the soul is united to God. Human love derives from the senses, it is nourished by the senses, but it cannot rest in the senses. In it by an obscure compulsion, the finite searches for the Infinite. It is, however, unknowing, a hunger for the divine, even when its object is another human.⁶

By their mistakes in their attempts at human love, Mauriac's personages are able to comprehend a notion of a divine love that is the expression of what they have sought. "Il y a donc trois Dieux? comme s'il n'avait pas su qu'il n'a qu'un seul Dieu-- qu'un seul amour" (Génitrix, p. 116). They understand that just as the three parts of the Trinity are distinct, they are parts of one godhead. Similarly their earthly loves of people, things and ideas are all parts of a larger love that encompasses all of these things. To find this love it is necessary to reconcile first the love of oneself with the love of God, for the pride and egotism expressed in the glorification of oneself are alien to the concept of Christian love. It is also necessary to reconcile the love of one's fellow man with the love of God. The love for man

⁶Michael F. Moloney, Francois Mauriac: A Critical Study (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1958), p. 82.

grows out of this love for God, but one's love for God must always come first. It is possible to be led to the love of God because of dissatisfaction with what human love offers and conversely, it is possible to purify the earthly expression of love by seeking union with God. For Mauriac, the love of other humans and the attempt to find happiness in one's relations with them are important stages in the realization that what they are really seeking transcends the human world and is not entirely within man's power to regulate.

V. THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS IN SOLITUDE

Mauriac's characters are faced with two aspects of solitude in their search for happiness. The social system of the Landes contributes to the development of both a physical separation and a psychological isolation. The well-known families of the region are installed in their large estates, out of sight of neighbors or passers-by. The houses are separated from each other by miles of flat, sandy land, enclosed by the pine forests whose rows of tall, straight trees form prison bars insulating each family in its own way of life. "Autour du drame interrompu, les grands arbres ... défendaient contre les regards étrangers le fils et la mère... Il semble que les êtres qui vivent là n'aient aucune autre communication qu'entre eux ou avec le ciel" (*Génitrix*, p. 106). Out of touch with neighbors, miles from a city of any size, connected to the outer world only by narrow, rough roads: this is the location of the estates of the Landes. "Argelouse est réellement une extrémité de la terre; un de ces lieux au-delà desquels il est impossible d'avancer" (*Thérèse*, p. 29). The life of the family is concentrated in this suffocating, self-sufficient location. Except when one wants to leave, there is rarely any need to go beyond the borders of one's own property.

Because of their separation from the rest of the world, these people know only one way of life. The system will not tolerate deviation. Any member of the family who finds a reason for disapproving of the accepted form of behavior is condemned. He is sentenced either to maintain a kind of physical separation from the other family members or to keep silent, mentally isolating himself from the group.

This personal separation creates a desert between the members of the family. The relationships become merely ones of utility where interactions occur only when necessary. These personages thus separated from each other sense with Thérèse the question: "Avaient-ils seulement un vocabulaire commun? Ils donnaient aux mots essentiels un sens différent" (Thérèse, p. 107).

Because of the lack of communication, each person is left to himself and progressively through the years he closes himself off from those around him. In Le Noeud de vipères Louis writes to his wife of an incident at the beginning of their marriage of which he says: "Alors s'ouvrit l'ère du grand silence qui, depuis quarante ans, n'a guère été rompu" (p. 59). Since they find it difficult or impossible to enter into a family life of which they disapprove, the non-conformists want desperately to be left alone. They are not crusaders trying to convert others to their beliefs. They only wish to be allowed to live without persecution from those around them.

Mauriac's characters think that by withdrawing from a suffocating situation they will be able to find happiness in their own

way of life. They seek a situation in which they are free from responsibilities and obligations and are allowed to examine their own ideas and motivations to develop a new life.

His personages, as much as they detest the society in which they live, must admit that they are products of that social system and the people in it. One cannot become a person in isolation. "Le dialogue est nécessaire à l'être humain. Qu'y a-t-il d'extraordinaire dans les gestes et dans les paroles d'un homme seul?" (Noeud, p. 185) One's associations with others determine what he is.

Nous avons tous été pétris et repétris par ceux qui nous ont aimés et pour peu qu'ils aient été tenaces, nous sommes leur ouvrage, --ouvrage que d'ailleurs ils ne reconnaissent pas, et qui n'est jamais celui qu'ils avaient rêvé.. Pas un amour, pas une amitié qui n'ait traversé notre destin sans y avoir collaboré pour l'éternité.
(Désert, p. 73)

Thérèse, Louis, Félicité Cazenave and the others are all formed by the same standards of conduct. The difference is that not everyone accepts the given guidelines. However, they all need this common experience to understand the behavior of those still committed to them. One learns to question by observing others and their behavior. It is possible to know about someone or something from second-hand knowledge. However, not until one gets to know that person or experience the action for himself can one

say that he personally knows anything about it. Mauriac's characters need this encounter with a stifling way of life, hostile family situation and distant friendships in order to have something to reject and from which to withdraw; this becomes a starting-point for the new life they seek under the guise of bonheur.

These people find that, in addition to the necessity of belonging to a social system, they need to isolate themselves from it periodically. They seek a time for introspection and self-examination. They have to examine the criticism they receive from others and formulate more clearly their own opinions of themselves and of those around them. Upon discovering the character of someone else, the person may find what he does not want to become.

C'est que dans ce silence toute la création prend vie. Dans ce silence nécessaire à l'homme ... l'homme emporte avec lui ce qu'il est, et souvent, ce que sa vie n'est pas. Dans ce silence l'homme ... éprouve la sensation que sur un certain plan-- et c'est souvent le plan sur lequel il mène sa vie-- l'Être et la vie ne coïncident plus.¹

Often Mauriac's characters become so engrossed in their own thoughts that they become almost incapable of rational thought.

"Dès que nous sommes seuls, nous sommes des fous. Oui, le contrôle de nous-mêmes par nous-mêmes ne joue que soutenu par le

¹B. M. Boerbach, "Introduction à une étude psychologique et philosophique de l'oeuvre de François Mauriac," Neophilologus, XXVII (1942), 264.

contrôle que les autres nous imposent" (Désert, p. 66). Thérèse describes her own experience: "Je crus pénétrer dans un tunnel indéfini, m'enfoncer dans une ombre sans cesse accrue; et parfois je me demandais si j'attendrais enfin l'air libre avant l'asphyxie" (Thérèse, pp. 96-97). She finds, when she is an older woman living alone, that in her solitude she was trapped "dans une prison pire que le plus étroit sépulcre: dans la prison de son acte et qu'elle ne s'en évaderait jamais" (Fin, p. 17).

The disparity between what these people are and what they want to be is a hard fact to accept. They are caught in their own thoughts and must make a conscious effort to extricate themselves from the dream world they have created for their contemplations. "Thérèse, en effet, mettait tout son effort dans le renoncement au songe, au sommeil, à l'anéantissement. Elle s'obligeait à marcher, à manger, mais surtout à redevenir lucide, à voir avec ses yeux de chair les choses, les êtres" (Thérèse, p. 159). Similarly, Fernand Cazenave, left in absolute silence and isolation after the deaths of his wife and his mother, realizes that he must make an effort to accept his life alone and to make the lives of those around him meaningful.

Several of Mauriac's personages decide that if they flee from the provincial small town to Paris they will be able to begin anew. They want to rid themselves of the past and put a distance between them and their problems. They seek a setting of anonymity where they

neither know anyone nor are known. They want to escape from their present setting in which everyone knows each person's life history. They want to be free to question, to observe, to relate, to decide ultimately what is best for them individually and be allowed to develop these ideas.

Jean Peloueyre leaves his wife to go to Paris ostensibly to complete research for a book. He realizes that he is assassinating Noémi by his presence and "il la fuyait pour qu'elle reflleurît" (Baiser, p. 98). He is eager to immerse himself in Paris in order to think about what has happened to him since his marriage. After several months he returns home, recalled by a letter from the priest who is his spiritual director. He finds that Noémi has indeed benefited from his absence to become once again an attractive young lady. He had become ill and despondent in Paris and had never visited a library during the stay. He sees that their love has not increased during their separation and that Noémi has, instead, become a friend of a new young doctor. Jean realizes that his voyage to Paris has harmed rather than helped their relationship.

Louis travels to Paris to find his illegitimate son whom he has been supporting. He has decided to leave his money to this unknown son as revenge for his family having turned against him. During his stay there he continues to examine his malicious attitude toward his family. He discovers that his unknown son has conspired against him, too. He returns to his family to attend the funeral of his wife. He has profited by the separation from his relatives

to reassess his family situation and he is able to see how he had alienated himself from them. It is too late to correct his relationship with his wife, but he still has time to change the destruction his years of hatred and indifference had wrought. "J'étais impatient de leur montrer mon nouveau coeur. ... Le noeud de vipères était enfin tranché ..." (Noeud, p. 214).

Thérèse, after her stifling life with Bernard, dreams of the day when she will be free in Paris. There she feels she will have the occasion to make her own choices, the freedom to act as she would like, not as the family dictates. "Jean Azévédo me décrivait Paris ... et j'imaginai un royaume dont la loi eût été de 'devenir soi-même'" (Thérèse, p. 93). "Être une femme seule dans Paris, qui gagne sa vie, qui ne dépend de personne ... Être sans famille! Ne laisser qu'à son coeur le soin de choisir les siens ..." (Thérèse, p. 150). Thérèse later sees in her daughter Marie much of her own experience. Thérèse has lived for years in Paris out of touch with family and friends of the Landes. She has grown weary of her solitude. Yet she sees that her own daughter, who has followed the boy she thinks she loves to Paris, is beginning to pursue this same vision of freedom and happiness that she had struggled to experience.

La petite, ce soir, remettait tout en question. ...
La petite qui n'était plus la petite... Pressée des
mêmes contraintes que sa mère avait subies, elle
avait étouffé dans la même cage

(Fin, p. 28)

Mauriac's dissatisfied characters discover that what they hoped to find in their solitude and withdrawal was inner peace and happiness. What they do find with their newly acquired freedom is that they are forced to examine their past actions and to recognize clearly the fundamental aspects of their own personalities. It is this self-examination that leads them to understand what they are seeking.

In The Desert of Love, Mauriac draws the major theme--that Divine Love is man's only fulfillment--in bold outline. ... To describe the various aspects of human isolation as a secondary theme he employs chiefly a wide range of imagery. By his skill in the use of this technique, Mauriac implies ... that human isolation is viewed by him only against the background of God's ability to satisfy the human heart.²

Their solitary, meditative lives are the settings in which their individual religious experiences will occur, for it is in this situation that they are most receptive to religious ideas.

²Sister Mary Humiliata, "The Theme of Isolation in Mauriac's The Desert of Love, Twentieth Century Literature, VII (1961), 112. See also Donat O'Donnell, Maria Cross: Imaginative Patterns in a Group of Modern Catholic Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), for a discussion of the "secret door" of the human heart and the sense of exile in Mauriac's novels.

VI. THE ROLE OF GRACE

The horror of solitude that these characters of Mauriac experience leads them often to some knowledge of God. Several of the novels end with the intervention of God's grace in the life of a person. One may perhaps wonder why these creatures who are so often odious and repulsive are chosen to be the recipients of this grace. However, the sinner is central to the writing of François Mauriac. He has said that he fails in portraying virtuous characters, and the saintly person is indeed the opposite of the Mauriac hero. Just as happy stories are seldom told, the saintly life rarely exists.

Il n'existe pas dans la réalité de belles âmes a l'état pur. ... Ce que nous appelons une belle âme, ne l'est devenue qu'au prix d'une lutte contre elle-même, et jusqu'à la fin elle ne doit pas cesser de combattre. ... Si le romancier a une raison d'être au monde, c'est justement de mettre à jour, chez les êtres les plus nobles et les plus hauts, ce qui résiste à Dieu, ce qui se cache de mauvais, ce qui se dissimule; et c'est d'éclairer chez les êtres qui nous paraissent déçus, la secrète source de pureté.¹

There is little of real interest in the description of the perfect way of life. But the description of some of the passions of the

¹François Mauriac, Dieu et Mammon, Oeuvres Complètes, Vol. VII (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1929), 315-16.

sinful soul leads one to recognize some of the faults of his own life.

What Mauriac offers is hope for the sinner. "Ce n'est peut-être pas pour vous, les justes, que ton Dieu est venu, s'il est venu, mais pour nous" (Noeud, p. 128). His novels illustrate the internal dichotomy of man, his propensity toward good and evil. He shows that virtue is not an end in itself. Man can be active and can make mistakes. However, because he has attempted to do something, he becomes worthy of reward. "What redeems the sinner in Mauriac's eyes is precisely the fact that he is not lukewarm, that he is capable of passion. For in the long run to be capable of passion is to be capable of love."² If man never wishes, then he is never disappointed. His complacency becomes a way of life that is never challenged by any outside force. Progress cannot be made until someone first questions the validity of the status quo. "His characters are charged with a mission; if they do not faithfully represent men, they trouble their quiescence, they rouse them from their slumbers."³

His personages are lowly, hateful, despicable creations, but they are aware of their misery. Mauriac has chosen the complacent or satisfied people as the targets of his social criticism. He allows his characters to be themselves. They do not have to put on any guise of sanctity in order to be saved. In fact, it is the

²Turnell, The Art of French Fiction, p. 305.

³Moloney, Mauriac, p. 134.

absence of any such camouflage that contributes to their salvation. Mauriac has stated: "Je crois que je suis aimé tel que j'ai été, tel que je suis, tel que mon propre coeur me voit, me juge et me condamne."⁴ They come to understand their situations and themselves because they do not try to reconcile their questioning, their concern, their inability to conform with the social mask that is the negation of their desires. By daring to rebel, they achieve some measure of fulfillment.

The psychological understanding in these cases ... is acquired by letting the characters be, without arrières-pensées about their eternal destiny. ... It is precisely then that their salvation or damnation becomes most significant and most believable.⁵

Man may reject God, but he is still prey to the unsatiated hunger for Him. Eventually many of Mauriac's personages are brought to the realization that there is a higher power than man in the world. Their dissatisfaction with the goals and values of their society, their disapproval of the things that were "sacred" to their fellow men, lead them to recognize this longing of the soul that is more persistent than the hunger for material satisfactions. For some it is the realization of a lost purity, a

⁴François Mauriac, Ce que je crois (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1962), p. 174.

⁵Martin Jarrett-Kerr, François Mauriac (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 58. ⁵

state of being that exceeds the human life. "J'eus soudain la ... certitude presque physique qu'il existait un autre monde, une réalité dont nous ne connaissions que l'ombre ..." (Noeud, p. 39). At other times there is the search for a superhuman force or being that is in control of the world and mankind.

Il y a une réponse du Christ à la question posée par chacune de nos vies. Si votre coeur est vide, Il est là pour le combler,--s'il est occupé d'un objet indigne et dont la possession tend à nous avilir, le Christ est encore là pour se substituer souverainement et absolument à cette faim et à cette soif, pour y substituer une autre soif et une autre faim.⁶

Mauriac expounds the Jansenist view of grace. God can impart it to whomever He wishes at any time. It cannot be earned by pious words and meaningless deeds. One does not merit the grace of God. It is a gift and not an achievement. God is the initiator of the event. Man's efforts to earn or achieve forgiveness are futile, for the final decision is in God's hands. What we might judge as worthy of salvation could be unacceptable. Mauriac has been accused by Jean-Paul Sartre of trying to play God with his characters, of deciding the destiny of his creations.⁷ However, Mauriac says in La Pharisienne that "chaque destinée ...

⁶ Mauriac, Ce que je crois, p. 83.

⁷"M. François Mauriac et la liberté," La Nouvelle revue française, XXVII (February 1, 1939), 212-232.

est particulière, et c'est peut-être l'un des secrets de la miséricordieuse justice de qui nous relevons, qu'il n'existe pas de loi universelle pour juger et condamner les êtres."⁸

Mauriac has shown in his novels that the sinner, the average man, the concerned human being is worthy of salvation because he has not let the world go by him. He has made an effort to be a reacting, alive, social being. Mauriac's characters merit nothing because of an exemplary life. If we were the judges, many times we would condemn rather than save them. Fortunately, we do not know whom God will choose or what will constitute the basis of his choice. We do not know when our individual opportunities may come. Mauriac has illustrated in his works the idea of Corneille that "Dieu touche les coeurs lorsque moins on y pense."⁹

Just as one does not merit the grace of God, the knowledge of this God is not an achievement of a conscious nature. One cannot prove the existence of God. Pascal wrote of Dieu sensible au coeur. Faith in God implies a personal relationship and not an intellectual exercise. It is difficult to create an image of a person or remember someone and have him seem really human. We forget much, distort reality, and make the other person over in our own way. A continuing relationship is necessary in order to have the person become credible. The same is true of man's

⁸Francois Mauriac, La Pharisienne (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1941), p. 270.

⁹Pierre Corneille, Polyeucte, Théâtre complet (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1950), IV, iii, 1276.

relationship with God. What man creates in an intellectual effort is often different from the resulting sentiments of an emotional experience.

Louis tries intellectually to find God. He has heard from his wife about her God, but her experience is not real or convincing to him. He thinks he needs a factually proven God. However, when he ceases to require a tangible God and becomes receptive to the internal urge to examine himself and his surroundings, God finds him as a result of his rebellion.

Brigitte Pian in La Pharisienne illustrates the transformation of self-centered piety into true spiritual charity. She comes to understand the hypocrisy of her former life and understands the need to reconstruct her ostentatious public expression of religion into a form that is more meaningful and personal (p. 296):

Au soir de sa vie, Brigitte Pian avait découvert
 enfin qu'il ne faut pas être semblable à un servi-
 teur orgueilleux, soucieux d'éblouir le maître
 en lui payant son dû jusqu'à la dernière obole,
 et que Notre Père n'attend pas de nous que nous soyons
 les comptables minutieux de nos propres mérites.
 Elle savait maintenant que ce n'est pas de mériter
 qui importe mais d'aimer.

Mauriac has a special affinity for Thérèse Desqueyroux. In his prefaces to both Thérèse and La Fin de la nuit he expresses his thoughts about her salvation. In Thérèse he says that he

wanted to be able to deliver her to God, but that he could not then. "Du moins, sur ce trottoir où je t'abandonne, j'ai l'espérance que tu n'es pas seule" (Thérèse, p. 6). In Fin, he takes her to the point where she should find the peace of God. The obstacle this time is that he cannot visualize the priest who will receive her confession. He adds that he has since found him and will perhaps some day finish the story of Thérèse.

This God that seeks out Mauriac's characters is a God of love and justice, but He is also demanding and selfish. "Le pécheur est un homme qui cherche à se réaliser sans Dieu et contre Dieu. Pécher, c'est faire passer Dieu après les créatures."¹⁰ God must have all or nothing. "Car le premier pas dans la voie du salut consiste à reconnaître cette signification théocentrique du péché et à confesser ses péchés à la lumière de cette révélation."¹¹ Once man has decided to follow the way of God, he must be able to give up the things of this world. By objecting to the society in which they live his active characters demonstrate that they are not dedicated to these values of the group. They are able to renounce this part of their earthly existence. The protagonists of the novels, disturbing as they may seem, are unlike "those lukewarm Christians whose lives did not appear to be broken by the great

¹⁰Bernard Roussel, Mauriac: le péché et la grâce (Paris: Editions du Centurion, 1964), p. 36.

¹¹Ibid., p. 38.

internal struggle between sin and Grace, who seemed all too easily to reconcile God and Mammon. Beneath the calm surface of these respectable lives he divined scandal, hatred, hypocrisy."¹²

Martin Turnell has compared the Christian life to a pilgrimage with the participants moving toward a goal.¹³ He has further stated that it is the wanderings and not the attainment of the goal that furnish the Catholic novelist with his subject.¹⁴ This is true in Mauriac's novels. His characters, in their search for happiness, follow many wrong roads, wander down numerous paths. They seek their goal in accumulating material possessions. They pursue their ideal in marriage or love. They observe those who are tradition-bound and ultimately seek their personal definition of happiness in solitude. For these personages it is not the final conversion that is important, for it is frequently hastily arranged and largely unconvincing. In fact, the outcome of the individual's dilemma is often doubtful. "Il fait vivre des créatures qui jouent devant nous une partie où nous sentons qu'elles engagent un enjeu éternel; mais nous ne savons presque jamais si elles vont gagner ou perdre."¹⁵

¹²Jenkins, p. 31.

¹³Modern Literature and Christian Faith (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1961), p. 7.

¹⁴The Art of French Fiction, p. 305.

¹⁵Pierre-Henri Simon, Mauriac par lui-même (Paris: Editions du seuil, 1953), p. 63.

Rather, it is the internal struggle of the characters as they attempt to come to terms with their environment, their society, their families, and themselves that makes these novels worthy of attention. They illustrate the idea that the Christian is committed to a life of struggle. Even when one has been converted, there are still temptations:

Non que la pharisienne fût morte en elle: la lucidité qui lui avait permis de se juger et de se condamner, la rendait fière. Elle ne croyait point qu'il y eût beaucoup d'exemples d'une chrétienne capable de reconnaître, à cinquante ans, qu'elle avait fait fausse route. Elle ne s'avouait pas qu'il lui était agréable maintenant de ne plus diriger personne. Parfois une profonde nostalgie la prenait quand elle songeait à ses années révolues. (La Pharisienne, p. 281).

There is no easy solution for these people. They perpetually combat some force whether in themselves or in society. They are not complacent. The Pharisees of their world of the Landes comment little about the "acceptable" sins of selfishness, pride, and cruelty toward the nonconformist. Mauriac's strong personages, by denying their individuality, are perhaps committing a worse sin than these more overt deeds for which they are criticized. By striving to rise above these petty controversies and by attempting to achieve some measure of self-realization, the characters of François Mauriac are forced to choose between God and Mammon as they pursue their separate visions of happiness.

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