

FRANÇOIS MAURIAC

Thérèse Desqueyroux

Translation, Introduction, and Notes by
RAYMOND N. MACKENZIE

Foreword by Joseph Cunneen



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A SHEED & WARD BOOK

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Foreword

What a splendid idea to go back to Mauriac! Two generations have grown up since he won the Nobel Prize for Literature, and few in America today realize how widely he was read, and how greatly he was revered—and reviled—at the time he was elected to the Académie française in 1934. One can only hope that Raymond MacKenzie’s fine new translation of *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, along with his authoritative introduction to the novel, will bring a host of new readers to Mauriac, as well as remind those who have already encountered his work to check their local libraries to look up translations of many of his other books.

Because Mauriac brought honest expression to the repressed passions of his central characters, giving voice to what he later discussed as the “anguish of the Christian life,” many French Catholic readers in the 1920s considered his work disloyal and dangerous. Although a committed Catholic from his childhood in Bordeaux—his thesis for his *license ès lettres* was “The Origins of Franciscanism in France”—he had no intention of contributing to the pious literature approved by the *bien-pensants* of his day. The heroes of most of his early novels are writers still in the process of discovering their vocation. Mauriac’s acknowledgment that Thérèse, an unhappy woman who tried to poison her husband, is in many ways himself indicates the deep tensions present in his best work.

“I am not a Catholic novelist,” he declared at the height of the controversy surrounding his fiction, “I am a Catholic who writes novels.” Mauriac’s fiction returns again and again to Bordeaux and

his youth. "I rediscover," he stated, "the narrow Jansenist world of my devout, unhappy and introverted childhood." Later he was to embrace a more tolerant Christianity, less obsessed with a negative view of sexuality and more concerned with fostering a just and humanist society, but in *Thérèse* his heroine remains a tortured figure.

This edition of the novel is especially helpful in adding Mauriac's first narrative effort to present his heroine, "Conscience, the Divine Instinct." This takes the form of an imaginary letter from *Thérèse* to her confessor; the novelist's earliest intention was to present her as a believer who is consciously working out her salvation. In the finished novel, however, she shares her father's rejection of Christianity, and has no sympathy for the "correct" practice of her husband and his family. When she is forced to attend Sunday Mass with them, however, she is somewhat drawn to the voice and mannerisms of the parish priest, identifying especially with his loneliness. The translator, I believe, has made a wise decision for this book, omitting three later short pieces in which Mauriac returned to *Thérèse*. In the last of these, "End of the Night," the unhappy woman finally submits to God, an ending which was sharply criticized by Jean-Paul Sartre as artificially imposed, a bad example of authorial omniscience.

In any case, *Thérèse's* story is a striking instance of Mauriac's criticism of the hypocrisy of bourgeois Catholicism in early twentieth-century France. The Bordeaux world he is describing is not far removed from that narrow nationalism and callous anti-Semitism exhibited a generation earlier during the Dreyfus affair. Respectability substituted for Christianity, and the desire to combine large landholdings made two families rush to insure *Thérèse's* marriage to Bernard Desqueyroux. What gives Mauriac's presentation of his heroine added depth is her realization that she too is attracted by the idea of owning hundreds of additional acres of pine forests. Though she is extremely intelligent, a constant reader, perhaps a frustrated writer, she does not question the economic order of her society, and enters into marriage as an inevitable fate. Clearly, opportunities for educated women have greatly increased since the 1920s, but an alert reader should be able to see that Mauriac's criticisms apply

even today to all those who would reduce the demands of the spirit to conformity with the social imperatives of the world around them.

Though Mauriac is no feminist, he identifies deeply with Thérèse, a woman manipulated by her society, in which the family controls her whole life, and where she can find no one to whom she is able to unburden herself. Her mother died when she was an infant; her father ignores her, totally absorbed by his hope to rise in local politics; her aunt Clara, a surrogate mother figure, is devoted to her but almost totally deaf. The world around Thérèse is completely stifling, but her emotions remain deeply affected by the scent of pine trees and the sundrenched landscape of the Landes.

Although the author shows his debt to Dostoyevsky and Freud, he remains a disciple of Racine in his classical restraint and concentration of dramatic action. He even suggests a connection between Thérèse and Racine's Phaedra, including an ambiguous reflection by the heroine about her "rustic Hippolytus." What is especially striking, as she travels home after her trial preparing for an encounter with her husband, is both the intelligence at work in analyzing her situation and her inability to come to any clear conclusions. Why had she married Bernard? What could enable her to breathe more easily?

There are no pat answers. Thérèse has committed a crime and undergoes an excruciating process of self-understanding. She must work out her existence in a world in which women can only be mothers, wives, old maids, or prostitutes. Marrying her husband had seemed natural in great part because his younger sister, Anne, was the closest companion of her childhood. As a young girl Anne possessed the charm of innocence, but she was extremely naïve, and easily taken in by the superficial charm of Jean Azevedo. The latter, though shallow, had a certain appeal for Thérèse by confirming her independence and suggesting the possibility of a different life in Paris.

Thérèse is narcissistic, shocking the family by apparent disinterest even in her own child, Marie. If she is also a criminal, it is worth keeping in mind that Mauriac calls the very writing of a book a violent act. It is also important that, despite Thérèse's passionate nature, her revolt against her husband was not because she desired another man; her act was an instinctive and desperate attempt to

break out of the limitations of her existence. The novel, beginning near the end of her story, observes her deep suffering, through which she perhaps arrives at a new level of self-understanding. Wisely, Mauriac does not try to answer the deep questions his novel raises. It is up to readers to resolve the mystery of its ending, with Thérèse on the sidewalk of a Parisian street, about to begin a new life.

Joseph Cunneen

Introduction

François Mauriac (1885–1970) published twenty-four novels in the course of his life, along with four plays, four volumes of poetry, numerous volumes of biography, and many volumes of criticism and journalism. Yet out of this huge body of work, the one title that remains his best-known work, both in France and outside it, is *Thérèse Desqueyroux*. One reason for this may be its sheer accessibility and emotional impact: few readers will fail to be moved by Thérèse and her plight. And many of us will recognize certain aspects of her character in ourselves—as Mauriac himself did. Thérèse can be seen as an existential heroine, before that term became fashionable, desperately trying to make sense of herself and her actions in a world profoundly alien to her. But direct as the novel's appeal to us is, it is also a book that richly repays careful, repeated readings. It is the most poetic of Mauriac's works, in the sense that it communicates more by imagery and implication than by statement. It is a novel of beautifully layered language, with not a wasted word, but it is also a novel of gaps, silences, and mysteries.

Mauriac first published *Thérèse Desqueyroux* serially in the magazine *Revue de Paris* (from November 15, 1926, to January 1, 1927), and in book form in 1927. At this point in his career, Mauriac's reputation was higher than it had ever been. He had left his native Bordeaux in 1906 to make his way as a writer in Paris. His first book was a volume of conventional and pious poetry titled *Les Mains jointes* (Joined Hands). Published at his own expense, the

book would have been a highly inauspicious beginning, but it caught the attention of Maurice Barrès, a highly influential writer and politician. Barrès gave the book a very warm review in the newspaper *Echo de Paris* in March 1910, and Mauriac's career was launched. What followed, however, was a series of respectable but rather derivative novels published between 1913 and 1921, resulting in unspectacular reviews and sales.

All that changed in 1922, with the publication of *Le Baiser au lépreux* (A Kiss for the Leper)—his first book, Mauriac later recalled, to sell more than three thousand copies.¹ With this novel, Mauriac entered upon the psychological and spiritual landscape that would dominate all his later work; he had at last found his own voice and his own subject: the psychological and spiritual analysis of tormented, often despairing souls, their stories played out in the arid Landes region of France. The novels that followed—especially *Génitrice* in 1923 and *Le Désert de l'amour* (The Desert of Love) in 1925—won him an ever-widening audience, an audience whose taste, both in France and throughout Europe and America, was strongly in favor of the sort of writers Gertrude Stein had famously dubbed the “lost generation.” The literary masterworks of the 1920s across Europe and America were, with some few major exceptions, expressions of spiritual defeat, of a civilization that had failed. In the English-speaking world, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) was the defining document. Mauriac's novels of the 1920s, with their alienated and desperate characters moving through a desert-like modern world, felt of a piece with this new pessimistic mood. Mauriac's novels would have felt, in short, like products of the literary movement we now call modernism. Nicholas Hewitt describes the three chief themes of 1920s French modernism as the crisis of civilization (brought on by World War I), the crisis in ethical values, and a sense of the absence of God.² To differing degrees, Mauriac's works of the decade all involve these themes and were received as such by contemporary readers.

But while he was being applauded as one of the new masters of the novel, Mauriac was also experiencing an increasing conflict. He was being attacked in the Catholic press as a writer obsessed with unhealthy and degraded characters and perverse psychology. What the secular reader could applaud as Mauriac's unflinching and bold

examination of the modern psyche, the Catholic could condemn as a sort of wallowing in sinfulness. Charles Du Bos, a contemporary Catholic critic highly sympathetic to Mauriac, said that between 1922 and 1928, Mauriac the novelist galloped ahead in achievement—but not Mauriac the Catholic.³ This conflict between the artist and the man of faith was still developing when Mauriac came to write *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, and it would lead to a period of personal crisis during the next several years following the novel.⁴

As we will see below, certain aspects of *Thérèse Desqueyroux* suggest that Mauriac was struggling with his faith—or at least the way some of his critics were expressing that faith; in some respects, Mauriac seems to be using this novel to respond to his Catholic critics by defying them. But to regard *Thérèse Desqueyroux* as either non- or anti-Catholic is to misread it; a more careful reading will reveal it as, on the contrary, a novel saturated in a deep, searching Catholicism, with a challenging and ultimately triumphant vision of a world penetrated to the core with God and grace.

The story of *Thérèse* has deep roots in Mauriac's life. In Bordeaux in 1905–1906, the newspapers were dominated by the scandal involving Madame Henriette-Blanche Canaby. She was accused of having attempted to poison her husband and of having forged prescriptions for toxic substances—aconite, digitalis, and chloroform. Her husband had been taking a legitimate prescription treatment, Fowler's drops—a medication that included small amounts of arsenic. He became sick, then worsened, and eventually the doctors determined he was suffering from arsenic poisoning. But he refused to testify against his wife, and none of the other poisons were found in his system. All these details, of course, were imported by Mauriac for the story of Bernard's poisoning. Madame Canaby was acquitted of the charge of attempted murder, but she was sentenced to fifteen months in prison for her forgeries.⁵ When Mauriac came to write his novel some twenty years later, many of the details—except the conviction—found their way into his story. He pointed out the connection between *Thérèse Desqueyroux* and the Canaby trial himself:

Among many sources for *Thérèse Desqueyroux* there was certainly the vision I had, at eighteen years of age, in a courtroom,

of a thin woman poisoner between two policemen. I remembered the testimony of the witnesses, and I made use of the story about the forged prescriptions the accused had made use of to obtain her poisons. But that was the point where my borrowings from reality stopped. Taking what reality could furnish me, I was going to create a totally different, more complicated character. The accused's motives had been, in fact, of the most banal kind—she loved a man other than her husband. This was not at all the case with my Thérèse, whose drama consists in herself not knowing what moved her to the criminal act.⁶

The novel does not, however, simply take the real-life Madame Canaby and complicate her: certain essential traits of Thérèse amount to a kind of self-portrait. The novel's preface insists on how well the author knows her, and the epigraph from Baudelaire also calls for sympathy with the "creature" we are about to meet. Mauriac often referred to his own connection with Thérèse, notably in an article written in 1935. There, he says:

We are of the same spiritual race . . . and from childhood we were accustomed to examine our hearts, to bring light to bear on our thoughts, our desires, our acts, our omissions. We know that evil is an immense fund of capital shared out among all people, and that there is nothing in the criminal heart, no matter how horrible, whose germ is not also to be found in our own hearts.⁷

This connection between himself and his character was not at first clear to Mauriac, and the novel grew into its present shape over several drafts. The first draft, "Conscience, instinct divin," is presented here as an appendix, and a comparison of the draft with the finished novel is highly instructive. In "Conscience," Mauriac was working with a much simpler, flatter conception of Thérèse—though she is already highly articulate and introspective. This early Thérèse is not an atheist but a practicing Catholic, and she is concerned entirely with repentance for her feelings, especially for her lack of love for her husband. There is greater emphasis on her love for Raymonde—the girl who would become Anne de la Trave in the final novel. A repressed lesbianism dominates this first version of Thérèse's character, and this survives into the novel's final form,

though it is no longer the single key to her character, and perhaps not even among the more important ones. But perhaps the most important difference between “Conscience” and the final novel resides in the freedom Mauriac allowed his character to develop, to become herself, and to go her own way. Eva Kushner puts the difference very clearly, saying that in “Conscience,” Mauriac can be accused

[of] leading his heroine to repentance in a quasi-automatic way, taking no account of the complexity of conscience. True, in the brief space of [the draft] the writer has scarcely enough time to make this complexity felt; but he can, nevertheless, suggest it. Now, it is precisely this total lack of nuance that characterizes the fragment “Conscience.” Here, Thérèse is a spiritually docile Christian confessing, in writing, to a priest, with no murderous intentions toward her husband, only reproaching him for being unable to make her love him. More than her intellectual superiority, it is her lucidity that makes her different from the other women of her region and class: and in another respect, she already resembles the Thérèse of the novel in being frustrated from experiencing a more complete human love, and in seeing that the vicissitudes of human love prepare the way for another, higher Love. With this situation, the critic finds it easy to show that the heroine is merely a spokesperson for the author. But none of this matters anyway, since there is no action, no occasion for the heroine’s free will to be tested in choosing between the allure of sin and that of Grace.³

By allowing Thérèse to grow and become less the edifying example of repentance and more a fully realized individual, Mauriac enormously strengthened the thematic heart of the novel. Again, Kushner isolates the issue:

If Mauriac didn’t keep to the simplified perspective of “Conscience,” if he wanted, from the beginning to the end, for his heroine to be given up to the anguish, the weight of her thoughts and acts, it is because he wanted to bring into his novel that night of incertitude which is the climate of human life. (95)