

THE SEVENTH SKIN

The Novels of François Mauriac

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ABOVE the bedclothes, over the sheets, sometimes men awaking will stare at their hands in amazement—dead fish gleaming in the moonlight; and, if it is stormy outside and the wind is howling, sometimes those fish will seem to twitch as if a fin or flipper moved. But reach for the nearby lamp, flick it on and such ghostly imaginings vanish. Like the rest of the body, the hands become taken for granted: men forget the mystery of their flesh, and not for one instant when they look at it do they remember those seven mysterious layers of skin which protect them. Custom has dulled their eyes to the miracle of consciousness.

François Mauriac, I would submit, might be described as a novelist of the seventh skin. He is concerned not with outward appearances, but with the heart; not with neat artistic designs executed as an end in themselves, but with words as a means of testifying to the Word. Reality is the aim of his fiction—a reality whose drama is heightened because it is played against an eternal background. He has written a *Life of Jesus* (1937) and knows that only Jesus, had he so decided, could have written the perfect novel because, being perfect man, his vision was perfect. Others can only hope to report upon the world as they see it and, being fallen creatures, their vision may be faulty. It is the load that all artists who are Christians must accept and carry on their backs. For as Mauriac comments in the American Collected Edition of his works: 'to write means to serve', and for a novelist to shirk his vocation as a writer is to renounce a God-given trust. Yet as Mauriac continues: 'I am only too well aware how rash it is to conclude that what seems, on all the evidence, to be our determined destiny, must necessarily be the expression of God's will. A vocation for evil, no less than a vocation for good, may well strike sparks from the young' and so, accepting the load, he diminishes his *apologia* to this: '. . . it may be that I was created and set down in one tiny segment of the Universe at a period when Revolt had become the theme on which most of our distinguished thinkers chose to expend their energies, for the sole

purpose of bearing witness to Man's guilt when judged by the infinite innocence of God. . . . The task, then, that Mauriac set himself as a novelist is clear and, looking back on the practice of his art during the last thirty years, it is perhaps salutary to look at the present; to see what form 'Revolt' has taken.

Mauriac's generation was born under the sign of Proust and Freud, and against their 'Revolt', by examining characters who held their ideas, he has constantly reacted. This is not to infer that he is a reactionary, since, though as a leader-writer of *Le Figaro* he has shown certain right-wing sympathies, in an age whose chief mark has been conformity he has steadily resisted stereotyping his characters—presenting them instead as men and women endowed with separate souls which are as different one from another as are their hands. Outright neither Freud's psychological findings nor Proust's ideas on time are rejected: rather Mauriac believes in complementing them, in enlarging upon them. At least this is the impression which a reader might take away from the novels had he read them one by one as they have been published over the years: but a reader who comes newly upon them, though he will still remain aware of Mauriac's reaction to 'Revolt' as it manifested itself in the 'twenties, 'thirties and 'forties, is likely to gain another emphasis of his reaction to 'Revolt'. Time has as it were changed the perspective, because today the great criteria in fiction are competence and smoothness. Even with a writer so distinguished in his craftsmanship as William Sansom there is a certain deadness in his work and it is only when he is compared with such a writer as Mauriac that one begins to see what causes that deadness. For the characters in Sansom's *contes*, short stories and novels are wonderfully motivated; the criss-crossing of their lives is masterly—and yet, despite this, their actions never become more than those of dancers trippingly and gracefully following the intricacies of a design laid out on some mosaic. As characters in a dance they lack independence because it would seem their author fears to stab them to the heart lest they should bleed and stain the pattern. It would be unsightly and so, because it would be unsightly, blood and guts (except in American fiction) are left out of account. Everything stops short at the seventh skin because to pierce it might prove unhygienic. In other words, no risks other than technical ones are taken lest ragged edges mar the smoothness or untidiness suggest a lack of competence. To restore

to the flesh its mystery and to speak truly of the heart Mauriac has risked everything.

In 1922 Grasset published Mauriac's *conte*, *The Kiss to the Leper*, in his *Cahiers Verts*: in the same series appeared Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* and translations of Logan Pearsall Smith's *Trivia* and George Moore's *Memoirs of My Dead Life*. This was not Mauriac's first book, for he had already brought out two volumes of poetry (in 1940 he brought out another—*Le Sang d'Atys*) and had four novels to his credit. But from the critics' point of view, *The Kiss to the Leper* meant Mauriac had arrived: in the French Press he was compared with Giraudoux, Larbaud and Paul Morand—and certainly along with *Thérèse Desqueyroux* (1927) and *The Woman of the Pharisees* (1941) it is among the three peak points in his achievement. Of the three it is the shortest, and, in its story of consummated and unrequited love, it states themes which echo through the rest of the corpus. Jean Pelouëyre notes of his future wife that 'there were blackheads on her nostrils', and in *The Unknown Sea* (1939) Robert looks at his wife and notices 'a few blackheads on the side of her nose'. These are echoing points of detail which could be multiplied, and may offend the squeamish for precisely the same reasons as do blood and guts, since to be squeamish in such matters is to capitulate to 'niceness' rather than the standards of decency. It is to forget Bossuet's dictum that 'one must know oneself to the pitch of being horrified'—a dictum which might well serve as an epigraph to any study of Mauriac. For as men advance in knowledge of their hearts, so may they get a piercing vision of their own guilt as fallen creatures 'when judged by the infinite innocence of God'. In such a view 'niceness' goes by the board, since it follows that Christ was not crucified on the Cross to safeguard the standards of respectability but to save men from their sins: crucifixion was never a hygienic death, and Christ's death on the Cross for the novelist who is a Christian must inevitably provide him with an explanation or give him a hint of that superintending design in which men move. It becomes in Newman's terms a case of 'if there be a God, *since* there is a God, the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity'. The alternative is 'either there is no Creator, or this living Society of men is in a true sense discarded from his presence'. Now Newman's arguments, powerful as they are, are arguments taken from his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*:

they are not the kind of arguments which can be translated into fiction without appearing dogmatic, and it is interesting to see how Mauriac converts such arguments for his own use in *Thérèse Desqueyroux*.

How humiliating cowardice can be! If that Being really did exist (for a brief moment she saw again that Corpus Christi day of blinding heat, a solitary man bowed beneath a golden cope, the Something that he bore between his hands, his moving lips, his look of suffering)—since He *did* exist, let him prevent the criminal act while there was still time. Or, if it was His will that a poor blind soul should open for itself a way to death, let Him at least with love receive the monster He had made. Thérèse poured the chloroform into the glass. . . .

But to hark back to *The Kiss of the Leper*: to the themes which echo through the rest of the corpus.

As the title suggests, there is the idea of being a leper, an outcast: '. . . when he pretended to be asleep she got up and kissed him as he lay in his narrow bed—a kiss like those given to lepers by the saints long ago'. Again, in *Thérèse Desqueyroux* there occurs this passage: 'She was fated to carry loneliness about with her as a leper carries his scabs. "No one can do anything for me: no one can do anything against me . . ."' And again in *That Which Was Lost* (1930) there is this sentence: 'Then, turning his eyes from the sight of the dead woman, he wept for himself, like a leper horrorstruck at the sight of his own hands'. In each case the leprosy is metaphorical, but it is intended to suggest a feeling of isolation, a sense of lost innocence—that terrible aboriginal calamity in which the human race is implicated. When Noemi Pelouyère discusses with the doctor her husband's illness, and he talks of him as soil specially prepared for the growth of bacilli, as 'tuberculisible' soil, she watches such technical jargon slip from his tongue and reflects: Were not those lips made for kissing? (This is doubly ironic in the context for earlier in the book Jean has thought: 'And how many times did Barbey d'Aureville betray the Son of Man for a kiss?'). In another passage in *The Unknown Sea* the idea of lost innocence is stated in even clearer terms.

Seldom is it given to man to realize the precise day and hour, the exact spot on his journey through life, when one whole part of his being falls away, and his face, till then marked by the soft indefiniteness of childhood, suddenly takes on the rigid

structure which it will carry with it to the grave. Such thoughts as these—and the Mauriac canon is interspersed with them throughout—recall Pascal's *Pensées* (which in the Brunschwig edition Mauriac has always carried about with him) and, if these thoughts do not relate to the heart, then they refer to innocence—and the Mauriac connection is this. As children lose their innocence, so they become more and more a prey to concupiscence. Time and again in the novels one discovers this theme being elaborated, with passion being given its full range because in life everything serves as fuel for passion: abstinence sharpens it, repletion strengthens it, virtue irritates it. But here again the squeamish—though this time for different reasons—are shocked: once more 'niceness' is offended. Yet one may recall Mauriac's own reply to Lefevre when he had suggested that he attached too much importance to the flesh in his novels—a criticism also often made of D. H. Lawrence and against which Mauriac has defended him. In his own case Mauriac replied to Lefevre that because most of his generation and their heirs treated the role of the flesh as any other fact it had lost all dramatic value; it had ceased to have anything mysterious about it. In short, to reach the heart the seventh skin must be pierced.

Among the numerous incisions which Mauriac has made there are a multitude on love: 'Nothing is ever wholly serious for those who are incapable of love', and 'All of us, men and women alike, are tender only when we love; never when we are the object of love'. But there are others which might not have come from the *Discours sur les passions de l'amour*, but suggest rather Montaigne. This, for example: 'Perhaps we know the woman who does not love us better than any other'. There are, too, the directly religious observations such as 'The relation of priest to layman is never neutral: he either attracts or repels', and the more specifically spiritual: 'None would be blessed had they not been given the power to damn themselves. Perhaps, only those are damned who might have been saints.' In all these instances is reflected that personal impersonality which is the paradox of Pascal and, in *The Frontenac Mystery* (1933), the switch from personal narrative to impersonal statement—yet a statement in which all are implicated—is superbly realized by Mauriac: 'In some obscure region of himself he knew what the future held—for we are always warned'. The thinker and novelist have become one.

None the less not always are the transitions so easy, and the three charges commonly brought that Mauriac is a Jansenist, Manichaeic and sensualist all have their grain of truth because there are times when Mauriac steps out of the realms of fiction, buttonholes the reader and tell him what he has personally set out to do. To preface thus *The Knot of Vipers* (1932) amounts to both a form of spiritual and literary cheating.

The man here depicted was the enemy of his own flesh and blood. His heart was eaten up by hatred and by avarice. Yet, I would have you, in spite of his baseness, feel pity, and be moved by his predicament. All through his dreary life squalid passions stood between him and the radiance which was so close that an occasional ray could still break through to touch and burn him: not only his own passions, but, primarily, those of the lukewarm Christians who spied upon his actions, and whom he himself tormented. Too many of us are similarly at fault, driving the sinner to despair and blinding his eyes to the light of truth. . . .

Enough! These are the flowery accents of the parochial sermon and in any case their author and his central character the miser are much better served in the quotation from St Teresa of Avila which precludes the story. ' . . . Consider, O God, that we are without understanding of ourselves; that we do not know what we would have, and set ourselves at an infinite distance from our desires'. This is the vein in which Mauriac declared in 1923 that it was his intention 'by presenting creatures entirely deprived of a religious life' to show 'the emptiness of souls—an emptiness especially notable among women'. The statement was without frills, but it was a bold and dangerous undertaking because, in using words to defend the Word and in asserting the mystery of the flesh, it meant presenting men and women who, true to the 'Revolt' of their era in girding against everything established, should in the last resort gird against themselves and so become aware of that Divine Image in which they were created. To the Hound of Heaven, had Pascal lived in the nineteenth century, he might have said: 'One always loses the game!' and, had Nietzsche eavesdropped, he might have added: 'One always loses the game—even your brain!' For Nietzsche's retort, had he made it as a final gird against Fate, would have sounded to Mauriac as a cry for Grace, because Mauriac's characters often have many resem-

blances with Nietzsche. They want to be Masters—Masters of their Fates—and when they fall (so the novelist would suggest) it is because they do not see the tripwires which have been laid by Grace. Sometimes however the wires are seen, by the needer and the effect is lost. *The Enemy* (1935) ends: ‘. . . Grace? It is the mark of our slavery and of our wretchedness that we can, without lying, paint a faithful portrait only of the passions’ and immediately the veil of fiction is off: the *conte* appears didactic rather than dramatic and, pithy as such an observation is, it is out of place and would be better relegated to an author’s journal. In fact this concluding remark comes as an anti-climax in *The Enemy* and so detracts in the total effect from some of the wires which, earlier and better laid, have done their work in such a natural yet supernatural way that a reader has not stopped to exclaim: ‘A trick—a trick device! Spiritual cheating!’; but rather: ‘How odd! That’s always happening in life!’

An artist who is true to the heart, however religious he may be, cannot rely upon a pietistic *deus ex machina*; nor upon a sudden conversion nor the improbable abandonment of the loose habits of a lifetime. If such changes are to take place they must be psychologically conditioned changes (and in this matter Mauriac has learnt much from Freud), since if they do occur they must have an air of likelihood about them. A formula mechanically employed is worse than useless because it is the artist’s function to re-create living experience; and because life today in any large city gives such an emphasis to sex, it is natural that sex will play a large role in any modern novel. To neglect it would be to exchange the real world for the world of swaddling clothes; to see men and women as from the prison of a cot, in which the bars obscure the vision. On the contrary, the artist or novelist who can pierce through to the heart and see life as it is, can also see life *as it could be*. For instance, when Doctor Courreges bends over his adored who is also his patient in *The Desert of Love* (1925) it is as a man of science, not a lover.

Leaning over the naked breast whose veiled loveliness had once made him tremble, he listened to her heart, then, very gently touching her injured forehead with his finger, he traced the extent of the wound. ‘Does it hurt you here . . . or here . . . or here?’ She complained, too, of pain on her hip. Very carefully he drew down the sheet so as to expose no more than the small

bruised surface; then covered it up again. With his eyes on the watch, he felt her pulse. The body had been delivered to him for cure, not possession. His eyes knew that they were there to observe, not to be enchanted. He gazed intently at her flesh, bringing all his intelligence to bear. The clearness of his mind barred all roads of approach to his melancholy passion. . . .

For the duration of this medical visit concupiscence remains a dead thing and it is a tribute to Mauriac's craftsmanship that he is able to induce a similar feeling in the reader—though it is an even greater tribute to his mastery of style and technique that his writing in this chapter is so taut that it carries along with it a number of corollaries that automatically flow out of the scene. One is made aware of something more than Doctor Courrege's purely scientific approach to Maria Cross' body. One is made aware of modesty itself; of that unfathomable *sapientia* in which love is locked away and wherein resides the mystery of woman. For love alone may strip itself bare and any other nakedness must perforce be a betrayal: to accept this is to assign to the flesh its true importance and sanctity, because when love is betrayed each betrayal is a further emptying of the soul, a further loss of innocence. As Mauriac himself has noted as a novelist: 'you become less scrupulous when you become less pure' and, though concupiscence and its effects have taken most of his attention, there is also the theme of spiritual pride which is the controlling theme in *The Woman of the Pharisees*—a hint of which was given a decade previously in *That Which Was Lost*. 'Irene had always had an idea that by the mere fact of visiting the poor and ministering to their wants she somehow justified the existence of poverty.' Brigitte Pian has the same idea, but, hypocrite as she is, there are moments when her defences are down—moments when she reveals herself as a woman of the Pharisees and at the same time, because she is not a stock character, shows that is within her one day to know herself to the pitch of being horrified. She remains continually a potential saint—the potentiality of which suddenly becomes apparent to the reader during an outburst. 'You know very well that it will be so because it is my will . . . [she checks herself]. And when I say "my will", I express myself badly, for we must not do what we will, but what God wills . . .' The point is made perfectly: this may be the first twinge of conscience, the beginning of a return to innocence, but innocence the wiser for experience. For

there is a scene in this book between the subsidiary characters which clinches the relationship of innocence to experience. Here is the paragraph in question:

The two young people who had fallen in love before the lines of their physical development had become fully determined, looked at one another with astonishment. There was what seemed to me a long interval of silence. The poor human insects had to trace backwards the stages of their metamorphosis before each could see once more in the other the child whom he and she had loved. But their eyes had not changed, and it was they, I am sure, which first gave them the clue to their identities.

The paragraph is characteristic. The telling phrase 'the poor human insects' recalls Pascal's comparison between man and God, an insect and man. For if Mauriac's picture of men without God is set in the Landes country where pine trees stretch out endlessly and the fear of fire is perpetual, where sheep in winter are the colour of dead ash and where every sort of scheming known in bourgeois circles is practised to keep plate and linen in the same family, where ten years' habitat in Paris makes a man no more than a provincial abroad—if these and a thousand other details may localize the Mauriac landscape they do not detract from its universal significance. As the ways of God seem inscrutable to men, so too, perhaps, *le coeur a ses raisons que la raison connoit pas*.