

FRANÇOIS MAURIAC

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In the days when Catholics had a livelier sense of their co-religionists in other countries, Francois Mauriac would have shown up on anyone's short list of great Catholic novelists. Far from being resigned to the marginal status to which the WASP domination might have wished for them, American Catholics were at home in the larger mainstream of western culture. They felt kinship with French novelists, English artists, German thinkers like Karl Adam and Josef Pieper, and a host of other writers and artists in many countries whose work was animated by the faith that had produced European culture.

Born in Bordeaux in 1885, the city in which he was raised and educated, Francois Mauriac went to Paris at the age of 20, where he enrolled in the École de Chartes. It is possible to imagine Mauriac as a paleographer, living out his days poring over manuscripts, breathing the dust of libraries. He was an aesthete, uneasy with the working classes, capable of the careful, unrewarding work of the scholar. But that was not to be. After a year, Mauriac altered his plans: he would become an artist. The world is a better place for that decision. His first book was a collection of his poems.

Many efforts have been made to discern Mauriac's political beliefs.

It is certain that as a young man he was close to the right, to the royalists represented by Action Française whose leader Charles Maurras was an agnostic who thought of Catholicism as a bulwark of social order. The movement had begun as a response to the Dreyfus case and had an anti-semitic tinge. Action Française was condemned by Rome in 1926, something that annoyed many Catholics but permitted others to separate themselves from a political movement that treated the faith cynically.

It can be argued that it was not the politics but the affirmation of traditional morality and its emphasis on the family that attracted Mauriac to the right. His early novels display the tensions within the family -- a son oppressed by his mother, a daughter-in-law who is acquitted of poisoning her husband, the brood of vipers who gather like crows while the patriarch dies. Not a pretty picture.

Mauriac's novels take place in half-light, his characters are troubled and by and large joyless, their Catholicism is a judgment on them. *A Kiss for the Leper*, *Viper's Tangle*, *The Desert of Love*, *Thérèse* were perhaps the ones most familiar to Americans. What was he up to as a novelist?

"If there is a reason for the existence of the novelist on earth it is this: to show the element which holds out against God in the highest and noblest characters -- the innermost evils and dissimulations; and also to light up the secret sources of sanctity in creatures which seem to us to have failed."

All in all, there are more sinners than saints in his stories and, as his statement indicates, it is the subtle, inward betrayals that interest him. To call his novels psychological would be wrong, given what that term tends nowadays to mean. Mauriac is interested in the drama of salvation, the deeds whereby human agents decide their eternal lot, not supposedly exonerating subconscious mechanisms..

In photographs from youth to old age, Mauriac is a thin figure with a massive nose and large heavy-lidded tragic eyes. When he is not collapsed in a chair, he stands like a carpenter's ruler that has not been completely unfolded. Frail, fragile, pallid, he seems an unlikely man to have produced the passion of the stories. Not a barrel of laughs, one suspects, but for all that a writer of power and pointilistic precision in depicting the gradations of good and evil in his characters.

Geoffrey Chaucer, late in his life, published a Retraction in which he expressed regret for having written what he had, including the *Canterbury Tales*, because he feared they were occasions of sin for the reader. Mauriac, stung by the shocked reaction of fellow Catholics (as well as by André Gide's jibe that he sought permission to be a Christian without having to burn his books), entertained similar misgivings about his novels.

In 1928, he went through a religious crisis from which he emerged resolved to be an unequivocally Catholic writer. There are critics who consider moral or religious convictions an impediment to the artist, no

matter the centuries when almost every great artist was a Christian. But narrative art does pose problems of the kind that bother writers as responsible as Chaucer and Mauriac, and they are to be admired for appreciating the inescapable moral implications of art.

Jacques Maritain had argued that the novelist who would depict sin must have the sanctity of St. Augustine. If observed, this rule would lead to a perhaps welcome reduction in the number of novelists, but it is clearly an overstatement. Generally speaking, the writer should get no more blame for the evil of his characters than he gets credit for their heroism.

Mauriac wrote a number of books which deal with the peculiar problems of the writer. *God and Mammon* (1929) was written in response to Gide's taunt. Ten years later, at the beginning of the German occupation of France, Mauriac wrote *Woman of the Pharisees* in response to a dismissing remark of Jean-Paul Sartre's. Mauriac had compared the relation of the writer to his characters with God's to his creatures. Sartre, an atheist, retorted that God was no artist, and neither was Mauriac.

Mauriac had been elected to the French Academy in 1933, he was universally acknowledged as a great writer, but he was stung by what Sartre had written. The response was a novel of great accomplishment -- and almost unalleviated evil in the main character. No unbeliever could have been harder on Catholic characters than Mauriac.

There was a Jansenist streak in him, a tendency to see evil as an

almost dominant force. His characters are unattractive, physically and spiritually, by and large, riddled with one or another of the capital sins. It is as if Dante never made it out of the Inferno. Mauriac himself felt this and, having nearly died after the appearance of *Brood of Vipers*, published *The Frontenac Mystery* in 1932, in which a happy and virtuous family is put before us.

Mauriac played a major part in the revival of Catholic letters in France which we associate with Peguy and Claudel and Bernanos. The Nobel Prize added global recognition to his inclusion among the immortals of the French Academy. He was interested in the work of Graham Greene, and vice versa. The latter's *Heart of the Matter* poses some of the problems apparently found in *Thérèse*, the sinner qua sinner being justified.

To his countrymen, Mauriac was a journalist as well as a man of letters, and he was to become an enthusiastic supporter of Charles de Gaulle. Mauriac's *Bloc Notes* and his *Memoirs* require a good deal of knowledge of the specifically French political landscape in order to be understood. But the novels retain their immediacy and pay rich rewards to the reader.