

François Mauriac (1885-1970): Defining the Catholic Novelist

“Perhaps one single faithful soul in every family suffices to draw after him all the others who are not faithful. That little boy who takes communion beside me, frail as he is, carries the salvation of an entire breed. From generation to generation, that torrent of love carves its course through baleful heritages. It is not merely the faithful wife who sanctifies the infidel husband. We never pray without all our kin praying with us. Redemption does not merely concern us as among the rescued, but as rescuers. Every staunch Christian in a state of grace is a redeemer. Whoever understands this is delivered from despair.”—*Nouveaux Mémoires Intérieures*

“I believe that we are each the Christ for one another. Insofar as we are wronged by others, know their weaknesses, sins, evil, and accept them, we are the Christ for them. And they in their measure of their awareness and acceptance, for us.”—Interview with Philip Stratford, Autumn 1959

“Exactly how does the real me differ from the created one? The day the writer starts measuring that difference is the day he loses forever that state of grace that is the state of indifference.”—*God and Mammon*

Mauriac’s Oeuvre

Broadly speaking, Mauriac’s work can be divided into four periods:

The Apprentice Period (1909-1921): These early novels show strongly the influence of Balzac. They lack the assurance of his more mature work, but many of his common themes are already in evidence. He began with two volumes of poetry during this period (1909, 1911) that remain untranslated into English.

1909 - *Les Mains jointes*
 1911 - *L'adieu à l'adolescence*
 1913 - *Young Man in Chains*
 1914 - *The Stuff of Youth*
 1920 - *Flesh and Blood*
 1921 - *Questions of Precedence*

The Dark Novels (1922-1928): These represent his first mature novels, and they explore with much greater assurance the realistic world and characters that are his subject-matter. Yet they are also often tragic and hopeless stories in which characters are dominated by fate and their destructive desires. *A Kiss to the Leper* is considered his breakthrough novel and *The Desert of Love* and *Thérèse Desqueyroux* the two great novels of this period. The later has been made into a film.

1922 – *A Kiss to the Leper*
 1923 - *The River of Fire*
 1923 - *Genetrix*
 1925 – *Orages* (poetry)
 1925 - *The Desert of Love*
 1927 – *Thérèse Desqueyroux*
 1928 - *Destines* (tr. *Lines of Life*)

The Catholic Novels (1929-1941): After Mauriac’s crisis of conscience, he turned toward more explicitly Catholic themes and issues, though the line of demarcation between these works and the former ones is less strong than is sometimes made out. There is, however, a stronger note of hope in many of these works. Of the six novels, *What Was Lost* is the first, though imperfect, work to more explicitly address the presence of grace. *The Frontenac Mystery*, in some ways the most autobiographical of his novels, explores a French Catholic country family and the young son who becomes a poet. *Viper’s Tangle* and *A*

Woman of the Pharisees vie for the title of Mauriac's masterpiece. He published a comic children's book, *The Holy Terror*, as well. This is also the period in which he publishes some of his first non-fictional meditations on his faith. *Anguish and Joy of the Christian Life* and *Maundy Thursday* explore issues of personal theology, while *Life of Jesus* is his more famous of two attempts to retell the life of Christ.

- 1929 - God and Mammon
- 1930 – What Was Lost (tr. That Which Was Lost)
- 1931 - Anguish and Joy of the Christian Life
- 1931 - Maundy Thursday
- 1932 - Viper's Tangle (tr. A Knot of Vipers)
- 1933 - The Frontenac Mystery
- 1933 - *Le Romancier et ses personnages* (essay)
- 1933 - The Holy Terror
 - 1 June 1933--Elected a member of the *Académie française*.
- 1935 – The Enemy
- 1936 - The Dark Angels (tr. The Mask of Innocence)
- 1936 - Life of Jesus
- 1938 - Asmodée
- 1939 - The Unknown Sea
- 1940 - *Le Sang d'Atys* (poetry)
- 1941 - A Woman of the Pharisees

The Public Writer (1943-1970): While certainly Mauriac was already a famous novelist and essayist, World War II brought a transition to Mauriac's literary pursuits. Mauriac increasingly moved to public journalism, plays, and memoirs. He did publish a few more novels. *The Lamb* is considered one of his most explicitly Catholic and his only intentionally allegorical story, and *Maltaverne* is considered something of his swan song. Of his four plays, *Asmodée* (1938), *Les Mal-Aimés* (1945), *Passage du malin* (1948), *Le Feu sur la terre* (1951), only the first has been translated into English and is considered by most his strongest drama. During this time, he also published a number of historical studies, such as *Saint Margaret of Cortona*, *Great Men*, and *De Gaulle*. He released several collections of literary essays and reflections, *Letters on Art and Literature* and *Second Thoughts: Reflections on Literature and Life*; more personal religious reflections, such as *What I Believe*, and perhaps his two best books from the period, his collections of autobiographical essays, *Mémoires Intérieurs* and *Nouveaux Mémoires Intérieurs*.

- 1943 - The Black Notebook
- 1945 - Saint Margaret of Cortona
- 1947 - Proust's Way
- 1950 - Men I Hold Great
- 1951--The Weakling
- 1951 - The Stumbling Block
- 1952 - Letters on Art and Literature
- 1952 - The Loved and the Unloved
 - 1952—Awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature
- 1954 - Words of Faith
- 1954 - The Lamb
- 1958 - The Son of Man (3rd edition)
 - 1958—Awarded the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor

1959 - Mémoires Intérieurs
 1962 - What I Believe
 1964 - De Gaulle
 1965 – Nouveaux Mémoires Intérieurs (tr. The Inner Presence)
 1967 - *Mémoires politiques*
 1969 - Maltaverne

Most of Mauriac's published journals (1934-1953, 5 vols.), most of his journalistic columns, Bloc-Notes (1952-1970, 5 vols.), some of early essays, and his early biographical books on Proust (1928), Pascal (1926), and Racine (1928) have yet to be published in English. Some of his columns have been translated and gathered in the collection *Cain, Where Is Your Brother?* (1962). Some of his journals are gathered in *Second Thoughts: Reflections on Literature and Life* (1961).

The Problem of the Catholic Novelist

In the first half of the twentieth century, French Catholics had parallel debates about the possibility of the Catholic philosopher and the Catholic novelist. Both debates settled around the relationship between nature and grace, a subject destined to evolve into a far greater and more vehement debate in Catholic theological circles in the 1940s and 50s. Broadly speaking, there were three general positions:

1. The Christian when philosophizing or creating works of fiction, draws inspiration from the Faith, but the two in practice run along separate, valuable tracks.
2. The Christian not only draws inspiration, but also valuable content from the Faith that shapes the direction of one's work. Theology shapes the direction that philosophy or literature will take.
3. The Christian pursues questions in philosophy (or in creative literature) that can only be answered by the revelation of the Faith. The questions left by the rational search of philosophy or the creative plea of literature are answered by the more clear assertions of dogma.

For the philosophers, the question was whether human reason can uncover natural truth effectively without the assistance of divine revelation, while for the novelists, the question had more to do with the goal of realistic description within literature. Both Andre Gide and Jean-Paul Sartre accused Mauriac of attempting an impossible task. Gide insisted that Mauriac was a better novelist when he let the natural desires and impulses of his characters have free-reign, while Sartre charged Mauriac with artificially truncating plot and characters with an artificial imposition of Christian belief. In some ways, the problem of the Catholic novel is one that occurs within Western standards for realism, even naturalism. Genres that are more open to the mysterious (e.g. fantasy, adventure, allegory, magical realism) have less trouble with this intrusion of grace. Perhaps this is because theological realities need the analogical and the symbolic to open themselves to our understanding.

For François Mauriac, the gratuity of a work of art is connected to the longevity of its influence, in that it arises out of an artist's personal struggles rather than being at the service of an ideological agenda or a utilitarian cause. To speak of the timeless or long-lasting life of great art, as he does, is to speak the language of hope rather than of artistic glory per se. When one hopes, one believes that that which is essential remains—that the true, good, and beautiful are not so fragile as to never survive brutality and human, stupid cruelty. Since Mauriac held such an ideal, he did not think that one should bind one's art to an ideological platform, including that of his own Catholic faith. However, his own attempts to come to terms with the relationship of his faith to his art led him down paths not unlike the three positions above.

In general, Mauriac's fictional worlds rotate about two polarities whose energies are nevertheless intertwined: the secular world of modern France, a world suffering from the absence of God, a world of lost forms and practices; and the older world of rural Bordeaux, a country world that is still informed by Catholicism, but one also infected by the new secular order. His realism in one way owes itself to the region of Bordeaux, to a land, a place, a time, and a people. These rotating points are infused with the tensions between nature and grace. Sometimes, this grace is more muted, and other times it is more present. Mauriac's great subject of love (romance, sex, family, God) is the impetus for this drama of salvation, and for him that means both psychological acuity and a phenomenology of grace. He is seeking to capture how the Infinite infuses the finite world of human love. And this means confronting the ugly that is deemed too often unlovable.

Mauriac understands that our love and our hate are deeply compromised. In being loved, we often rebel and seek to break away. We fail to pity those we love, or we seduce in name while we hate in truth. The war for salvation is at the very center of our desires, and often times the hunt for pleasure is not really about happiness, but about distraction from the void within us. Friendship and solitude, attraction and revulsion are also intertwined within this war. As a novelist, Mauriac is concerned with giving his characters something of the freedom that he finds in human existence. He cannot entirely control them without marring them. Just as people have a mystery that we cannot entirely penetrate, but must stand alongside, so his characters cannot be entirely explained. At the same time, Mauriac (like Bernanos) believes that there is a communion across people, a corporate complicity and responsibility that none of us can entirely control for or escape, and the working of Providence eclipses us, too, so that we, despite our free choices, also are fated in dramatic and existential ways.

A Few Thoughts on *God & Mammon*

Since the MacKenzie introduction is quite good at setting up both the context and the key ideas of *God and Mammon*, here I mostly want to call attention to a few matters:

1. Mauriac draws an important distinction between invention of materials and art as the expression of the artist's self. He does repeatedly acknowledge in his essays that there is a strong connection between the author's self and that of his or her works; nonetheless, he is arguing for the creation of a work of fiction that is precisely not himself and has its own freedoms as a creative object.
2. Likewise, his distinction between "the pure reader" who reads without any knowledge of the author and the confessional reader who seeks to find autobiographical knowledge of the author within his novels points to two extremes of readers. Most of us lie between.
3. The chapter on Rimbaud acts as a kind of test case for Mauriac's understanding of being marked with the cross. Rimbaud spends almost his entire life in rebellion against his faith only to return to it near death.
4. The question of fidelity to human life versus potential corrupting influence on susceptible readers is at the heart of Mauriac's crisis of conscience. Both make demands on the moral novelist, and especially so on the Catholic novelist. Literature, by its very nature, wounds us, yet these wounds may or may not be beneficial.
5. Mauriac's discussion of Maritain's position on pages 38-39 is partially mistaken, as note 61 recognizes. Still, the distinction between being a "creator" and an "observer" of fictional life remains because of the fundamental question of what constitutes realism.
6. Chapter 7 is a good meditation upon Mauriac's own novelistic stresses—providence, freedom, conversion, resistance, and youth versus old age.
7. The last paragraph of the essay is a brilliant tour-de-force on the sacramental and incarnational issues in play.