

TIME AND FRANÇOIS MAURIAC

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PROBABLY no major Catholic writer has been the subject of more controversy among his co-religionists than François Mauriac. The generally acrid atmosphere of the novels, the darkly pessimistic view of human nature ('Why must he write about such unpleasant people?'), the spiritual perturbation of the so-called 'pre-conversion' period—singly and conjointly these have inspired an abundance of searching debate concerning the validity of his Catholic position. Yet, it is almost certainly true that Mauriac is the most widely accepted among that gifted group of Catholic men of letters of this century who have gained for Catholicism in France a hearing and a respect unknown since the century of Bossuet. Consequently, it may be relevant to point out one aspect of Mauriac's work in which his unquestionable Catholic orientation sets him sharply apart from the leading writers of fiction of his day.

If there is a single theme more than any other which has attracted the major novelists of the past third of a century it is that of man's relation to time. Proust in France, Joyce in Ireland, Virginia Woolf in England, Thomas Mann in Germany, Faulkner in the United States, to name only the most eminent, have all been centrally concerned with the time problem. A contemporary critic has even suggested that Herman Melville anticipated these writers by half a century in the development of a metaphysics of time.¹ But leaving Melville aside as representing the possible premonitory intuition of genius, the virtual simultaneity of impact of the time thesis in the works of the foremost practitioners of the contemporary novel in the western world is a striking phenomenon.

It has been said that the effort of Joyce in *Ulysses* was '... to wrest a single endurable day out of an eternity of flux ...' and the phrase describes aptly the parallel preoccupation of Joyce's peers. To isolate, from time's measured and unceasing flow, a moment within which man may feel some semblance of security while he labours at self-reconciliation has been their consistent

¹ *Publication Modern Language Association of America*, 67 (1952), 702-715.

burden. What is its explanation? It would seem reasonable to suppose that it is related to the disillusionment, to the time-weariness which engulfed the west in the wake of World War I. There is much to support Berdyaev's contention that that war marked the end of the epoch inaugurated by the Renaissance. Certainly it can scarcely be questioned that from the beginning of the seventeenth century (Whitehead's 'century of genius') the focus of western intellectual activity has been the study of pure science and its practical application. The crass optimism of the nineteenth century with its blind scientific faith in an evolutionary materialism which would lead man to ultimate perfectibility could not survive the disaster of 1914-18. It is noteworthy that in the years immediately preceding that catastrophe, Henri Bergson had been working out his philosophy which was at once a criticism of the spirit of scientism and an effort to effect a synthesis of the truly scientific and the spiritual. It is not an exaggeration to say that the central effort of Bergson's philosophy was to provide a demonstration of the freedom of the human will. Here his importance to the novelist becomes evident, for Mauriac is surely correct in insisting that unless the human agents are free the task of the novelist loses all meaning. Moreover, for Bergson, the problem of the freedom of the will is inextricably linked with the problem of the meaning of time. Consequently, he rejects the radical mechanism of Huxley because it '... implies a metaphysics in which the totality of the real is postulated complete in eternity ...' He rejects, too, the radical finalism of Leibniz since it '... implies that things and beings merely realize a programme previously arranged. But if there is nothing unforeseen, no invention or creation in the universe, time is useless again.'²

Bergson provided a rationale for the viewing of human life as free, on the one hand, from the interference of the supernatural and, on the other, from the determinism of nature, and this is precisely the view which the novels of Proust reflect. Proust, to be sure, goes beyond Bergson in that the latter's '... temporal present ... an elusive moment on the wing towards an open and endless future ...' becomes for him '... an abiding essence which holds the past and the future captive.' But it was unquestionably Bergson's philosophy which, to a generation suffocating beneath the weight of a triumphant materialism

² *Creative Evolution*, translated by Arthur Mitchell (New York, 1911), p. 39.

pointed the way to an ideological retreat analogous to the cork-lined room in which Proust wrote. There bulwarked against the operation of physical laws by Bergson's severance of time from space and against the operation of eternal laws by Bergson's theory of the elasticity of internal time, Proustian man becomes the generator of his own life. In his description of the great moment of recall in the Guermantes courtyard, Proust outlines at length his subjective theory of reality which makes man in effect the creator of his own world. In the memories of Venice, Balbec, and Combray, past and present are merged by the creative imagination and the narrator attains '... the only environment in which he could live and enjoy the essence of things, that is to say, entirely outside of time'.

This personal and relative interpretation of time is wholly foreign to Mauriac. Absolute time is a fundamental component of his world. His plots are quick-paced and relentless in their movement. His characters are poised between the ephemerality of creatures and days that pass and the diuturnity of God and the eternal verities which do not pass. His brooding compassion for the human lot, which the serious reader quickly senses in his bleakest plots and most forbidding settings, is based on a conviction of man's subjection to suffering but it is rendered more poignant by his sensitivity to man's concomitant subjection to time. On the blank canvas of childhood, he insists, years and sorrows, equally inescapable, will sketch the outline and compound the colours of the final portrait. And this is as it should be, for the passage of time is essential to human destiny. For those who would escape it, especially for those women who would arrest its advance, Mauriac has no patience. The childlike countenance of the worldling which sometimes survives into adulthood, untouched by the acids of decay, carries for him the sign of a malediction. It testifies that there is nothing so sad as a being satiated with pleasures, that satiety itself resembles disease. How many women apparently endowed with all the gifts of life are stifled in a solitude against which sleep is the only defence. By a kind of infernal grace no excess touches their incorruptible youth. They are delivered from every ordeal, even the old age which is common to every living thing. Incurably young, happy in the eyes of the world, they are spared from suffering by a privilege so constant that in the end they are frightened by it.

This type of woman helps man to understand why his prayers are not granted, for affliction is the measure of God's love.³

Those who would insulate themselves from time may do so, Mauriac makes clear, only at the expense of isolating themselves from life, for time is of the essence of human fellowship, of the substance of the human adventure. Hence, it is the destiny of the 'incurably happy' to be always alone. They do not attract the hearts that suffer. They have nothing to give or to receive. But sometimes the polished and untouchable worlds of these too carefully groomed women is invaded by a human love which becomes the instrument of Grace, the harbinger of God. Such a love shatters barriers, destroys the false happiness, troubles the false peace, dissipates the false youth, separates the creature from the enveloping comforts, thaws out the source of tears. The individual thus visited, believing her condition hopeless, does not know that her malady has actually been healed.⁴

Time, then, is for Mauriac a fact which man cannot deny, and there can be no dignity in lives which attempt to throw off its universal bondage. The 'horrible race of ageing and inconsolable adolescents' (of whom Raymond Courrèges is the most striking example in his novels) are as ridiculous in their rejection of time's omnipresence as are the enamelled and withdrawn females. The dominance of time gives to youth itself a particular wistfulness, for youth carries humanity's hopes into a battle which will always be lost, but which, under the spell of its evanescent magic, man believes can be won. To this theme which is so strongly present in the novels, Mauriac has given memorable expression in *Le jeune homme*:

'It is true that youth possesses a powerful appeal, a melancholy charm. We observe the advance of each generation into the arena as we do that of the bull which we are certain will be killed. We try to ignore the issue of the struggle. We persuade ourselves that these newcomers possess a secret, a message. We take seriously even their incomprehensible babbling. We discover ourselves in them. They say they do not understand themselves, that they are solitary, that they would love, that they cannot love. They take up the eternal burden of our solitude. . . . They are possessed by a dream. . . .'⁵

³ *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1951), XI, 187.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Op. cit.*, IV, 450-51.

The mystery of youth lends to its possessor a magnetic appeal which in no way derives from personal merit. Hence, '... a young man is rarely cherished for himself but for that fleeting light which touches him for a moment, no more nor no less than millions of others'.⁶ The corrupted and corrupting circle which surrounds Bob Lagave, the hero of *Destinies*, is attracted not so much by his faun-like beauty of person as by their consciousness of his possession and their loss of youth's momentary splendour: '... what they adored... was their own tainted youth, now passing from them or already dead... all that they had lost forever and whose reflection lured them to this ephemeral youth. A religion brought them together here—a mystery of which they were the sole initiates, with its rites, its sacred formulae, and its liturgy. Nothing was of any value in their eyes but this irrevocable charm that had now escaped them. And there they were sitting round a body that glowed for yet a few days longer, with the first fires of youth.'⁷

It has been said that Mauriac is a novelist of adolescence. This is true although not quite literally. It would be more accurate to say that he is the celebrant of the nostalgic memories of adolescence. Very likely for most adolescents the conscious splendour of their springtime is obscured by its proximity. Mauriac has preserved the sensitivity of youth—'Whether one be ten or fifty, one's tears are always the tears of a child'⁸—in his vision of life but he has added an adult's haunted awareness of youth's fragility and time's remorseless march. This awareness, which for most men is a rare experience, is a birthright of most of Mauriac's characters. Daniel Trasis, one of those eternal pursuers of youth and the innocence which it promises, suffers in the realization that Gisèle de Plailly is not so young as he had first supposed. Around her mouth, her eyes, her neck, the signs of time's ravages already appear.⁹ Raymond Courrèges, like '... all those who confound the ideas of happiness and youth... had a consciousness of the passage of time which was ever active, strive though he might to keep it muffled'.¹⁰ The ageing Thérèse about to exercise her fading charms on the young man at the hotel finds his '... youth without

6 *Op. cit.*, XI, 63.

7 *Op. cit.*, 34.

8 *Thérèse* (New York, 1947), p. 245.

9 *Oeuvres Complètes*, I, 236.

10 *The Desert of Love* (New York, 1951), p. 10.

alloy, youth in its purest state . . . ' to be something of a miracle. Her own life has been a frenzied effort to stabilize the promise which youth offered and she confesses her failure.¹¹ In the final episode of her career young Georges Fillhot, once Thérèse has unmasked herself, reads the ravages of time in her face. 'Her gaze was as lovely as he had ever known it, but round the eyes that had so often set him dreaming he now could see a world of ruin which never previously he had suspected—the burned-up environs of a dead sea.'¹² The diarist of *Vipers' Tangle*, separated from his wife by a lifetime of hate, still sees in the stout, almost invalid old woman Isa had become, the Isa of his days of courtship: ' . . . the girl devoted to white, on the road in the Lys valley.'¹³ The tight family unity of the Frontenacs which under the steady hands of Blanche and Uncle Xavier creates a refuge for the children from the realities of life must at last be shattered and a final long vacation put an end to the simple pleasures of childhood and to the joy which does not soil the heart.¹⁴ Gabriel Gradère, fatally ill in the parsonage of Abbé Forcas, will never again ' . . . be the child who once had waked on summer mornings of holiday, and taken off his shoes and stockings the better to feel the warm sand under his feet, and stood in the stream, letting the water of the Balion eddy and divide about the dark columns of his legs. He had passed for ever that milestone on his road where those who are called by name must rise and leave all that is theirs.'¹⁵ Pierre Costadot remembers the night when he had solaced the stricken Rose Revolou as a turning point in his life. 'Seldom is it given to a 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.'¹⁶ In *The Loved and the Unloved*, Gilles Salonc embodies for Nicolas Plassac ' . . . all the youth and loveliness, and terrible fragility of life . . . on which time was already laying its finger'.¹⁷

It is clear, that far from attempting to disguise time or to mute

11 *Thérèse*, pp. 165-184.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 307.

13 (New York, 1946), p. 184.

14 *The Frontenac Mystery* (New York, 1951), pp. 95-96.

15 *The Dark Angels* (London, 1936), p. 338.

16 *The Unknown Sea* (New York, 1948), pp. 44-45.

17 (New York, 1952), p. 20.

its effects, Mauriac deliberately stresses it as a necessary element of his fictional vision. The lives of his characters are made up of contiguous and interconnected moments through which, like the links in a chain, the effects of an action once taken are radiated in endless sequence throughout a whole existence. For each the drama of life is essentially the drama of the collision of time and eternity. He offers no possibility of man's withdrawal into an inner world where time is not and where the human spirit, freed from the limitations of time and space, impresses on the materials of sensuous recollection an order and character of its own choice. The dignity and the awesomeness of human life for Mauriac lie in the impingement of time on the timeless and of the timeless on time, in which process, far from achieving a mutual impenetration, each retains its own identity. The actions which man performs in time are registered in time. They leave their impression upon the delicate perceptibilities of the nervous system, conditioning it for readier participation in parallel actions yet to come. But they are registered, too, in a world beyond time where the same inevitability of relationship is established. A decision once taken, there is no turning aside from the consequences it involves. Still the endless chain of ganglionic and muscular compulsion can be broken on the plane of time just as can guilt and retribution on the plane of the eternal, by the intervention of Grace. It is Grace alone which for Mauriac preserves man's autonomy and opens to him the possibility of escaping time not by immersing himself in it but by transcending it.
