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Mauriac: The Ambivalent Author of Absence

Abstract

This essay explores the significance of first- and third-person narrative voices. Although, as Gérard Genette points out, the choice of either voice is not in itself significant, transitions between the two voices are. Such transitions serve to disclose the absence of an author's point of view. They are a privileged means of revealing that no narrative voice can be entirely truthful or persuasive. In two Mauriac novels, *Thérèse Desquevroux* and *Le Noeud de vipères*, transitions between first- and third-person voices are produced by linguistic differences between the "I" and the "he." These differences create a rhetoric of voice: the "he" hides and figures an implicit "I," while the "I" hides and figures an implicit "he." This rhetoric generates opposing plots recounting both the author's and the reader's search for a hidden, truthful voice: for an implied writer or reader. One plot traces an effort to disclose, within an inauthentic "he," a hidden, authentic "I." It culminates only in a recognition of the formal nature of all stories and all voices that tell them. The other plot recounts the discovery that the "I" hides a "he." It reveals a very different truth: that the "I" is alienated from its formal role and from the formal nature of the narratives it recounts. Both of these plots are linear accounts of how the narrative was composed and how it should be interpreted. Both create seemingly truthful voices—implied writers or readers—who tell them. But because these plots represent the same narrative in contradictory terms, they ultimately demonstrate the impossibility of saying what the narrative is doing or who, if anyone, is doing the narrating. Indeed, Mauriac's characters ask whether the writing and reading of narrative do anything at all. Not only do they disclose the absence of an implied writer or reader; they call into question the very notion that the text represents or constitutes actions or events: its narrativity.

Keywords

first-person, third-person, narrative voices, Gérard Genette, Mauriac, voice, Thérèse Desquevroux, Le Noeud de vipères, implicit, I, he, implied writer, implied reader, reader, writer, narrativity

MAURIAC: THE AMBIVALENT AUTHOR OF ABSENCE

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Since Sartre's essay on *La Fin de la nuit*, François Mauriac's narrators have been compared to Balzac's intrusive and judgmental narrators.¹ Such a comparison is not unjustified, since the third-person narrator in *La Fin de la nuit* does seem to impose a Christian point of view on his main character. But the generalization of Sartre's reading to all of Mauriac's novels is unfortunate and highly misleading. It has contributed to a widespread misunderstanding of his best works, which in no way impose a point of view on their characters. On the contrary, they call into question the very possibility that narrative can express an author's point of view.

The apparent cause of this misreading, and of a general, critical neglect of Mauriac's works, is the author's decision to have his protagonists, rather than an omniscient narrator, express his thoughts on narration. In *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, it is the heroine, not the third-person narrator, who asks whether any narrative voice can explain what characters are doing. And in *Le Noeud de vipères*, it is Louis, the first-person narrator of only part of the novel, and not an omniscient narrator of the entire novel, who explains why no narrative voice can say what the author is doing. However, these extremely modern discourses on the absence of an authorial point of view have somehow been ignored, and we have been told that Mauriac's novels express his Christian beliefs.²

Mauriac's originality, however, is to express his protagonists' discourse on point of view in the form of an inquiry into the significance of narrative voice. Thérèse discovers that all narrative misrepresents her life when she attempts to compose in her mind a first-person story of her life that is more truthful than her family's third-person account. And Louis realizes that all narration invites unintended readings when he tries to construct a written, first-person narrative of his life that is more persuasive than any written or spoken third-person narrative. Both protagonists conclude that neither first- nor third-person narration is inherently truthful or persuasive. All narrative voices misrepresent the author's point of view.

In this essay, I will discuss the fundamental structural and rhetorical differences between first- and third-person narration that Mauriac's protagonists disclose. This differential relationship between the two narrative voices provides a preliminary answer to one of the major questions being posed by modern criticism. Are distinctions between first- and third-person narration significant? *Thérèse Desqueyroux* and *Le Noeud de vipères* confirm Gérard Genette's statement that the choice of either voice is in itself arbitrary.³ But both novels provide strong evidence that transitions between first- and third-person narration are not at all arbitrary. This evidence is produced when Mauriac redirects his protagonists' comments on voice back on his own transitions between first- and third-person narration. These transitions are in fact quite dramatic. In *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, the omniscient narrator gradually hides his third-person voice behind the first-person voice of his heroine's inner monologue, but at a critical point replaces her first-person narration with his third-person narration. In *Le Noeud de vipères*, Louis's first-person diary gives way, after his death, to third-person accounts of his life. Through his protagonists, Mauriac reveals that the transition from first- to third-person narration is significantly different from the reverse transition. Each plays a distinct role in the overall textual structure that discloses the absence of the author from his text. And only together can they uncover Mauriac's profound ambivalence as to what the absence of his Christian point of view might mean.

I. Narrative Structure as Narrative Law

Although *Thérèse Desqueyroux* and *Le Noeud de vipères* both question any link between narrative voice and point of view, *Thérèse* concentrates on the structural differences between first- and third-person narration that generate her questions, whereas *Louis* develops the rhetorical implications of these differences. *Thérèse* begins to question the relationship between narrative voice and point of view when she tries to replace a patently false, third-person story of her life with an authentic, first-person one. She is upset with the fictional account of her life that her father and lawyer have constructed in order to protect the family reputation. They wish to destroy all traces of her

apparent attempt to poison her husband. Were the true story to be known, or, worse yet, were it to be told in the local newspapers, her husband's family name would be tarnished and her father's political career ruined. In order to prevent that outcome, they plan to do everything possible to convince the public that the story of her crime is a fiction. Her father thus proposes to use his political influence so that the Sunday newspaper will entitle the article on her aborted trial "A Scandalous Rumor" (*TD*, p. 7).⁴ To bolster the illusion that she has been slandered, he tells his daughter that she and the husband she almost killed must act like an adoring couple "til death do you part" (*TD*, p. 12). In this way, he creates a fictional story of his daughter's conjugal bliss that falsifies a significant part of her past life and dictates all her future actions. It reduces her to a pre-defined role within a fictional sequence of events. "[L]ike someone threatened with suffocation" (*TD*, p. 8), she experiences it as an attempt to destroy her individuality and freedom.

Thérèse's sense of being suffocated by her father's story is her first step towards realizing that her actions have always been constrained by a more general family story. Her attempt to understand this constraint leads her to disclose the formal nature of this story. Motivated by honor and political ambition, the family story is a conventional, shared myth that dictates the acceptable mode of behavior to which respectable family members must adapt. Its strict criteria give each member's life an acceptable order and direction by distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate goals: men go hunting and oversee the property, women remain faithful and bear children, etc. Not only does the family story dictate actions, it also dictates thoughts, in particular, the motivations that perpetuate it: "all my thoughts, till that moment, had been . . . 'fitted to the road' that my father and my parents-in-law had traced" (*TD*, p. 65). Like the local carts, all built with an identical wheel base to fit the ruts in the local roads, her thoughts and actions have been molded by the family story to fit a "shared destiny" (*TD*, p. 93).

When Thérèse criticizes the family story, she presumes that it has a unified plot similar to the one that Aristotle finds in tragedy. For Aristotle, a tragic plot, as opposed to an epic plot, is constituted by a sequence whose order and direction give an inner unity to the actions and events it recounts. This inner coherence is recognized only retrospectively, at the end of the plot, and is based on a notion of probability or necessity. Probability or necessity are in turn decided

by opinion.⁵ A proper plot thus gives actions a socially acceptable “telos,” a destiny. Similarly, Thérèse’s family believes that its story has a strict order that defines a common destiny, although, unlike Aristotle, it would prefer to eliminate all dramatic reversals of fortune or recognitions of hidden truths. Yet like Aristotle, it believes that the order of events recounted in its story imitates a probable or necessary order of actions in the real lives of its members. Moreover, it bases this belief on opinion, in this case a mutual agreement that the story accurately represents the destiny of all members. For the family, as for Aristotle, the process of imitation involves an adaptation of family history to a conventionally acceptable order: it is a process of “plot-making,” of constructing a story that will persuade the public as well as themselves. “For the sake of the family the world must suppose that we are in complete harmony,” her husband tells her (*TD*, p. 93). Even though this artificial act of constructing a plot suppresses all events that contradict its chosen beginning, middle, and end, the family does not seem to think that it might produce a purely fictional story with no significant relationship to real or probable family history. Thus, although family members know they are lying about Thérèse’s specific crime, they feel that they are doing so in order to protect the sequence that represents the overall family destiny, a sequence that her crime might lead others to misunderstand. They feel that their plot imitates a necessary, underlying reality when, in fact, it actively constructs reality. However, Thérèse, whose life is being repressed by the family’s plot-making, is acutely aware that it is primarily a means of persuasion, not revelation.

The family builds on the Aristotelian notion of a unified plot by adding a crucial distinction between narrative voices. Bernard drums into Thérèse that the family story is strictly a third-person story. The ideal family member is not interested in the actions of an “I,” a “you” or a “we”: “I am out of the picture” (*TD*, p. 93), he tells her; “You have ceased to have any meaning. . . . The name you bear is the only thing that matters” (*TD*, p. 94). The individual is only a proper name denoting an absence of individuality within the third-person story of the impersonal family group: “The only thing I am worrying about is the family. Every decision of my life has been dictated by the interests of the family” (*TD*, p. 93). It is not a question of what “I” do, but of what a Desqueyroux does. The proper name refers to the family, not as a group of individuals, but as an impersonal institution that operates according to a pre-set plot.

To be precise, the proper name refers to the role in the family story that the member it designates should play. In public, a Desqueyroux must be "forever playing a part" (*TD*, p. 129), even if this role misrepresents his or her actions and thoughts. A woman's primary role is to perpetuate the species. When Thérèse was pregnant, she was "a sacred vessel . . . the container of their young" (*TD*, p. 76). Emptied of all individual contents, she could better serve the sacred role imposed on her by family ritual: to contain, then pour out another member who will carry on the family line. If all family members perform their roles according to script, the family story will appear unified and historically true. No one will know that it is a fiction whose narrator only appears to be omniscient.

Not only must all members act in a manner that makes this story appear true, they must also pass the family story line on from generation to generation. Within the family, the proper name refers to a very specific role, an inherited act of narration. Thérèse's father and husband are narrators who constantly remind those inside and outside the family of its destiny as wealthy, respectable landowners. Their acts of narration are impersonal, since they simply repeat the story they have inherited. But they are not passive, for they involve a repression of all words or actions that might give rise to contradictory accounts of their destiny: "the best thing would be for Thérèse to disappear altogether. . . . People would quickly get out of the way of talking about her" (*TD*, p. 123). Since Thérèse's statements rewrite the family story and since her actions, in particular her crime, invite others to do so, she threatens to reveal that the family heritage consists of a deceitful act of plot-making. Its historical continuity is provided less by inherited physical actions or character traits than by a third-person act of narration.

It might be objected that Thérèse is only speaking about one particular act of third-person narration, the family's. But for Thérèse, all third-person narration is as formal and repressive as the family story. Her own account of her husband's life, for example, is no less false: "Surely there must be a lot more to [Bernard] than the caricature of a man with which I have to rest content whenever I feel tempted to conjure up his image?" (*TD*, p. 64). When she tries to narrate his actions or thoughts, she too must rely on the family story. Her knowledge of the falsity of this story does not enable her to escape its misrepresentation, only to realize how it misrepresents. Third-person narration can at most permit her to discover that it reduces character

to “caricature” and defines actions according to the arbitrary beginning, middle, and end of a unified plot. It at most gives evidence of how it eliminates the individuality of its characters and author. This does not mean that, for Thérèse, third-person narration has the formal unity of a single tragedy. Rather, it resembles an epic poem or a picaresque novel, but one in which a single plot is repeated in a variety of different stories and which, when told by her, is capable of pointing to the arbitrariness of its plot.

Thérèse’s insights about the formal nature of third-person narration stem from her discovery that it is a deceptive form of first-person narration.⁶ When she says “whenever I feel tempted to conjure up his image [lorsqu’il faut me le représenter]” (*TD**, p. 89), she recognizes that her third-person story of Bernard’s life is a product of an act of narration, her own. First-person narration differs from third-person narration in one fundamental way. First- and second-person pronouns, as Emile Benveniste has written, are “self-referential indicators.” They refer to a “reality of discourse,” to the act of narration itself, whereas third-person narration refers outside the narration to an “‘objective’ situation.”⁷ The third-person hides the act of narration (and the implicit, first-person pronoun), while the first-person points to it. Thérèse’s use of the first-person signals her awareness of her act of narration as a difference between the plot she constructs and her husband’s life.

Thérèse’s conscientious recognition of her own act of narration, however, leads her to imagine that first-person narration, unlike third-person narration, might give access to something beyond narrative: to the life of the person narrating, the author. Indeed, the first two-thirds of the novel recount her repeated attempts, as she returns home from her trial, to construct a first-person narrative that will convey to her husband the sequence of events that lead her to begin poisoning him. Now, any link between narrative and life, if it exists, must be independent of plot, for she knows that plot, whether it be told by a first- or third-person narrator, misrepresents her life. Her first-person representation of her own life will falsify her life as much as her third-person representation of her husband’s life falsifies his. She cannot avoid substituting an ordered plot for a fundamentally disordered sequence of desires, thoughts, and actions: “Can mere words contain this confused chain of desires, resolutions, unforeseeable acts?” (*TD**, p. 22). But as mentioned above, first-person narration questions its plot, thus differentiating its narrative from its plot. First-person narration

designates narrative as a process of constructing and demystifying plot, not as a simple presentation of plot, just as Thérèse alternately forgets and remembers that she is constructing a fictional story of her husband's life. But this process of narrative differentiation raises the possibility that her first-person narration might reflect a hidden becoming that made her real-life actions different: first-person narration might have an authenticity independent of plot. After all, is not her act of narration closer to her actions, thoughts, and desires than is her family's?

Thérèse bases her notion of authentic, first-person narration on the theories of a young idealist, Jean Azévédo. Jewish, tubercular, and intellectual, Jean is an outcast from Bordeaux society. Moreover, he has openly rebelled against its constraints. Not long before Thérèse began to poison her husband, Jean told her how her rebelliousness and impulsiveness fragmented the order that Bernard, with her complicity, was imposing on her life. This fragmentation, he said, uncovered the unique direction of her life. Certain privileged individuals, he stated, had an "individual destiny" (*TD*, p. 69) that distinguished their lives from the "shared destiny" of most men (*TD**, p. 93). These rare, free individuals followed their unique destiny by refusing to make their actions or thoughts conform to society's predetermined plots and by surrendering themselves to a mystical, inner force: "we were not free to choose the subject of our conversations, or even of our thoughts. . . . People like us always float with the current, go where the slope leads. . . ." (*TD*, p. 66). If Jean is right, then Thérèse can explain to her husband why she began to poison him only if she can teach him to reject the directed sequence dictated by the family story. He must learn to sense the direction hidden in her fragmented and undirected narrative of her past actions. Her first-person narrative must demystify the plots it constructs, thus resembling the narratives later constructed by some of the new novelists. For a moment, Thérèse can believe that the "I" is not only a reference to the arbitrariness of narrative plot-construction, but also a sign of closeness between her narrative and the ineffable becoming of its author's life. It appears to be infinitely superior to the "she" of the family story. The third-person pronoun becomes a sign of a blind effort to reduce narrative to a unified plot that misrepresents characters and author.

Mauriac finds an ingenious way of showing that Thérèse's comments on third- and first-person narration also apply to the omniscient

narrator who is telling her tale. Gradually effacing signs of his third-person, omniscient narrator during the first half of the novel, he virtually eliminates him when Thérèse remembers her discussions with Jean. For approximately fifteen pages, the third-person narrator merely quotes Thérèse's inner narrative as if her first-person voice were the only voice. At the very moment that she rejects exterior, third-person narration (narration that is not omniscient) for authentic first-person narration, the omniscient narrator thus acts as if he too has decided that his character can best tell her own story.⁸ This parallelism between Thérèse's thoughts on narrative voice and the omniscient narrator's change of voice is too striking to be coincidental. Mauriac seems to be making his character say that the omniscient narrator is also exterior to the life he is narrating, that he misrepresents it as do exterior, third-person narrators. He thus designates his narrator as an implied author who is inventing his character's inner narrative. This reflection of his character's comments on narration back onto his omniscient narrator's act of narration raises the possibility that omniscient narrators are superfluous—a rather embarrassing situation for an omniscient narrator—unless, of course, the third-person story of Thérèse's life is an authentic, if covert, first-person narrative of Mauriac's own life.

But the very notion of authentic first-person narration is a fiction that Jean, like Emma Bovary, has borrowed from the books he has read. Since this fiction is no more adequate to Thérèse's life than is the family story, she eventually rejects her first-person narrative: "this story, constructed all too well, had no link to reality" (*TD**, p. 135). Jean's notion that Thérèse's actions can remain independent of the plot of the family story is an illusion. First of all, Bernard retains the means necessary to force her to adapt to the family story: he can always reveal to the authorities that she did in fact begin to poison him. More importantly, Thérèse finds within herself a force that leads her to adapt to the family story and that is as real as the force which leads her to distinguish her life from it: "the Thérèse who took pride in marrying a Desqueyroux . . . is just as real . . . as the other" (*TD*, pp. 129-30). Since part of her wants to be an accomplice in the family's common destiny, she cannot explain her crime by saying that it was motivated by a need to eliminate the family's influence on her life. Jean's notion of her "individual destiny" is just another linear plot with an arbitrary beginning, middle, and end. The order it gives to her actions is as arbitrary as the one the family story gives them. The

only difference is that Jean's counter-plot defines itself as a linear rebellion against all plot, as an act of differentiation. Although he says that this act of differentiation culminates in a spontaneous and formless becoming, there is no evidence in Thérèse's life that her act of differentiation, her effort to poison her husband, was anything more than a means of making herself appear different, a process defined by a conventional, romantic story that she had heard from her teachers before borrowing it from Jean (*TD*, p. 19).⁹

First-person, "authentic" narration cannot accurately represent an author's actions any more than third-person narration can truthfully represent someone else's. Neither voice is a sign of the closeness of its narrative to the life narrating or the life narrated. Rather, both indirectly refer to a distance between narrative and life. In *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, third-person narration becomes a reminder of the distance between its plot and the life it claims to order, whereas first-person narration becomes a reminder of the distance between the act of narration and the life of the author. Both voices come to refer to the formal nature of narration: the third-person to the artificial nature of the plots that narrative constructs and the first-person to the artificial nature of the process by which narrative demystifies its plots. Thérèse's search for a truthful voice only unveils the absence of her life from any third- or first-person narration. Neither voice can protect her from her husband's wrath.

Thérèse's first major insight is that she is in a world of narrative. She and her family are incapable of reflecting upon life without reducing it to the formal plots of the family story of adaptation or Jean's story of differentiation. When they talk to each other or to themselves, they do not compare perceptions or thoughts; they compare stories. Consciousness of others or of oneself is mediated by the fictional characters and authors that these stories create. The prison to which Thérèse returns is a world of intersecting stories, characters, and implied authors, a prison-house of narratives.

Through Thérèse, the omniscient narrator of *Thérèse Desqueyroux* designates himself as a fictional, implied author. His discourse invents his character's thoughts and actions or the becoming of the real author's thoughts in the same way that the family invents Thérèse's life or Thérèse invents the becoming of her life. Mauriac's narrator can only pretend that his discourse on narration takes place in a real person's thoughts (*Genette, Figures III*, pp. 206-11). Narrators deceive readers into blindly imagining that their words

represent a person's actions and thoughts, just as Thérèse's father deceived her into believing that the family story represented hers. The transition of Mauriac's narrator from third- to first-person narration hides the gap between narrative and the life that it purports to represent. It is a means of persuasion, of heightening the illusion that the narrator's words equal his character's thoughts and that her thoughts equal her actions. His dramatic effacement of his third-person voice, in concert with his character's criticism of third-person narration, intensifies the illusion that he has rendered his narration transparent and that it authentically reveals a pre-existing mental world.

Immediately after Thérèse realizes that her transition from third- to first-person narration has tricked her, Mauriac's third-person narrator "reappears" and recounts her story for her. This return to overt third-person narration can only mean that the narrator accepts his character's conclusions that first-person narration is a covert form of third-person narration. It is certainly not a sign of a return to the illusion that the third-person voice is objective.¹⁰ Rather, when Thérèse rejects Jean's story of differentiation, she affirms that first-person narration misrepresents the life of the "I" in the same way that third-person narration misrepresents the life of a "she," by confusing it with a conventional plot. The "I" is as estranged from the life of the author as the "he" is from the life of someone else. As subject and object of the same utterance, the "I" is a form of third-person narration. When Thérèse says "this story, constructed all too well, had no link to reality" (*TD*, p. 135), she affirms that the character in her first-person narrative is not herself, that it is someone else, a "she." Through his heroine, *Thérèse Desqueyroux's* third-person narrator thus substantiates Gérard Genette's important point that neither first- nor third-person voices necessarily imply truthful modes of narration.

The narrator's return to third-person narration is a sign that he accepts Thérèse's conclusion that she is caught in a world of interweaving stories. It also reverses the relationship between voice and narrative. Whereas we usually assume that the choice of first- or third-person narration confers certain qualities on the narrative, it is in fact narrative that creates the illusion that a particular voice is objective or authentic. Although the family believes that third-person narration increases objectivity, its consistent and universal act of plot construction is what makes its third-person voice appear omniscient. And although Thérèse temporarily believes that the first-person pronoun increases the authenticity of narrative, her repeated effort to

demystify the plot of the family story and differentiate her life from it is what really makes her first-person voice seem more authentic. In *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, narrative creates the illusion that a particular voice can bring it closer to life.

After discovering that the attributes of first- or third-person narration are a product of the stories she tells, Thérèse begins to pay more attention to the structure of this narrative. Rather than ask whether someone else or she can better tell the story of her life, she asks what structures have made her life alternate between the family story of adaptation and Jean's story of differentiation. As a result, she discovers a "powerful machinery of the family" (*TD*, p. 99), of which the family is unaware, which dictates the order in which she told certain stories of her life: "she had acted in obedience to some profound, some inexorable, law. . . . She had not brought destruction on this family: rather it was she who would be destroyed" (*TD*, p. 99). She has already asserted that, as a child, the family made her a blind accomplice in constructing stories of a shared destiny: "all my thoughts . . . had been equally fitted 'to the road' which my father and my parents-in-law had traced" (*TD*, p. 65). But she now adds that her life was controlled by a hidden family mechanism whose laws dictated her telling of the story of differentiation, the story with which she justified her apparent attempt to destroy the family's power over her life by poisoning her husband. This mechanism not only produced her story of differentiation, it ultimately repressed it. It now condemns her to be a conscious, but unwilling accomplice in its deceitful act of narration: "to put on a mask, save face, put them off the scent" (*TD**, p. 136).

The family mechanism described by Thérèse is a narrative structure since it regulates an interplay between the family's story of adaptation and her story of differentiation. This narrative structure is linear, since it begins in Thérèse's blind conformity to the family story and ends in a certain knowledge about the process of plot-construction and the error of third- and first-person narration. It tells a story of how narrative creates and demystifies plots and voices, a story of how narrative functions. Thérèse's greatest insight is to recognize that narrative rather than historical structures dictate the stories with which she has represented her life as a child, a newlywed, and an unhappy wife, and narrative determines the order in which she tells these stories. Her error at this point in the novel is to confuse this narrative structure with a law, one that has a specific denouement: the death of her freedom and the victory of the family story. In other words, her mistake is to

reduce her story of how narrative functions to a specific plot. This confusion of a narrative structure with a narrative law, however, must be partially attributed to her family's tyrannical insistence that its members appear to act and speak according to its story, its mandate that they confuse history and narrative.

Thérèse's narrative structure depends upon a distinction between plot and narrative that is quite unconventional. We usually assume that plot and narrative are synonymous, but in *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, where narrative constantly points to its artificial act of plot construction, narrative demystifies the plots it constructs and differentiates itself from these plots. Rather than the laying out of a plot, narrative becomes a process of plot construction and plot demystification, one that alternately identifies narrative with, then distinguishes it from, a specific plot. Thérèse's narrative of her life, the one she composes before and after she returns home to her husband, consists of three steps: she first traces her complicity in constructing family stories of adaptation according to the plot they deem appropriate; she then demystifies this plot and replaces it with stories of differentiation according to a counter-plot, and she finally demystifies this second plot and replaces it with a third plot describing how narrative structures interweave the first two plots. Clearly, plot here is not simply an arbitrary tool that the critic may or may not use to describe narrative; it is part of the very processes by which Thérèse composes and interprets her narrative, that is, in reading and writing.

This distinction between plot and narrative is inherent in all narrative, as Paul Ricoeur's reading of Aristotle suggests. If, as he argues, plot-making is a "synthesis of the heterogeneous," then there will always be a difference between the plot that narrative synthesizes and the heterogeneous, narrative elements excluded by that synthesis (Ricoeur, pp. 65-71). Narrative would be constituted by the active processes of constructing plots (by excluding the heterogeneous) and demystifying plots (by bringing out heterogeneous elements that the plot misrepresents). Thérèse's rebellion against the family story is caused by her awareness of those heterogeneous aspects of her life that the unified plots of Bordeaux society exclude. But her effort to free herself from these plots demonstrates that no narrative can capture the heterogeneity of narrative, the "confused chain" that makes up her life, for rebellion only replaces one false plot with another. Narrative constantly differentiates itself from the plots reading imposes on it, but it can do so only by inducing the reader to misrepresent it in the form of another plot.¹¹

What makes Thérèse's narrative structure particularly interesting is that it dictates a process by which narrative differentiates itself, not only from all its plots, but also from first- and third-person voices. It prescribes the transitions between third- and first-person narration that demystify both voices. We have seen that third-person narrators imply first-person narrators to the extent that they can always say "I" (if not necessarily participate in the events they recount), and that first-person narrators imply third-person narrators to the extent that the "I" must always speak about itself as if it were a "she" or "he." But first- and third-person narration are not identical. There remains a difference between the two, since the "I" points to the act of narration whereas the "she" does not. Although the choice of third- or first-person narration does not render narrative more objective or authentic, transitions between the two do communicate a strong message. The transition from "she" to "I," like heterogeneous elements of the narrative, points to the act of narration, of plot construction. The transition back from first- to third-person narration points in two directions. On the one hand it splits the act of narration (the "I") in two. On the other hand, it points away from the act of narration, and hides its plot construction (Thérèse must lie). Whereas the transition from third- to first-person narration engenders a process of demystification that distinguishes narrative from plot, the transition back from first- to third-person narration can continue this demystification only by means of a remystification that falsely identifies narrative with plot. This remystification can be lucid, as in the case of Thérèse, or blind, as in the case of her husband.

The process of demystification, in which transitions between first- and third-person narration disclose that both voices are misleading, is clearly derivative of the more general process by which narrative calls its explicit plots into question. The transitions between voices are meaningful because first-person narration points to the act of narration and third-person narration away from it. But voice is not the only narrative category that can point either to or away from the act of narration, as my discussion of the relationship between plot and the heterogeneous aspects of narrative demonstrates. However, Mauriac's choice to dramatize this more general process through transitions between voices has the particular advantage that it calls into question the very possibility of a truthful, narrative voice. This process only begins with Thérèse's demystification of third- and first-person voices. Once she has rejected third- and first-person narration, she discovers the possibility of a more fundamental, narrative

voice created by the process of demystification itself, a narrator who would tell the story of this demystification. But since this narrator is created by the process of rejecting first- and third-person narrators, it cannot be identified with either voice. It resembles first-person narrators to the extent that it points to the act of narration, but it resembles third-person narrators to the extent that it differentiates itself from the characters about which it speaks by designating itself as the process that creates these characters. It is thus an implied narrator who speaks for an implied author which would be narrative structure itself. Narrative would be an auto-telic process that tells the story of how it constructs and demystifies its plots. The only correct plot would be an implied one that organizes the story of how narrative was written and how it will be read.

But can this story of how narrative functions be reduced to an implied plot with a beginning, middle, and end? Can narrative tell the true story of its writing and reading when it cannot tell the true story of a character's or narrator's life? The negative thrust uncovered by Thérèse, narrative's tendency to differentiate itself from all its plots and voices, would suggest that it can only claim to tell the true story of its writing and reading, that the notion of an auto-telic narrative is another narrative illusion. Thérèse demystifies this last plot at the end of the novel, but does not explain why. Louis, in *Le Noeud de vipères*, does. He describes how narrative constructs and demystifies the plots with which it represents its writing and reading. It is the rhetorical nature of narrative that invalidates any representation of why it was written or how it will be read. By demonstrating how narrative reveals that it misrepresents what it is doing, Louis unveils the otherness of narrative. He discloses the true absence of an author.

II. "We do not know what we desire. We do not love what we think we love."¹²

When Louis, the first-person narrator and principal character of *Le Noeud de vipères*, begins writing his wife a letter, he describes a world of competing stories very similar to the one Thérèse describes immediately after her trial. But this world is not new to Louis. Throughout much of his life he has felt that he has a privileged

knowledge of the narrative structures that govern the interplay between the stories he and his family tell: how they construct a story that misrepresents their lives, how this misrepresentation provokes him to tell a counter-story that invalidates the plot of the family story, and how the latter represses this counter-story and reconstructs its own. And like Thérèse's family, Louis's family attempts to impose its story on the actions of all its members. The only apparent difference between the two "family machineries" is that Louis's family believes its life has a distinctly Christian destiny. His wife and children feel they are charitable beings who are destined not only for social prominence but also for Christian redemption. Louis's attempts to demystify their story of a Christian destiny take the form of a story of their temporal destiny. He tells how they have performed only those acts of charity formally prescribed by the church. This formal charity has lost all meaning: "That charity was synonymous with love was something that you had forgotten, if you ever knew it" (*VT*, p. 71). Their lives, he writes his wife, have in fact been filled with acts of vanity and greed, not of true charity.

When Thérèse discovers the narrative structure that produces and represses her story of rebellion, she renders it comprehensible by reducing it to a linear plot. The narrative of her life, she feels, ends in her realization that her family is totally self-deceived by its story and that she must lie to them about her knowledge. But Louis, a successful litigator, comes to believe that he can teach his family to doubt the stories they tell. Although he knows that his wife and children have consistently refused to listen to his analysis of the family situation, he thinks that he can nonetheless get them to read his written account of it: "you will read these pages to the end. I need to believe it. I do believe it [Je le crois]" (*VT*, p. 17; [*NDV*, p. 21]). Accordingly, he writes his wife a letter, which becomes a sort of diary. Its purpose is to make her aware of the mechanisms that motivate her, her children, and her grandchildren to deceive themselves. This diary, which is to be read after his death, represents a last-ditch effort to communicate through written words what Louis has failed to convey through spoken words during his life.

Louis hypothesizes that the structure dictating how his family provokes and represses dissenting stories is only a surface structure. Although it is unlikely that his wife and children will stop clothing their lives in a story of their Christian destiny or that they will consider his mockery justified, they might nevertheless be taught not to

take their story literally. Even if their words are conditioned by a fixed narrative structure, they might learn to distinguish their thoughts and actions from their words. Louis's insight is that the narrative structure regulating the battle between his family's story of a Christian destiny and his story of their search for money and recognition might influence their actions in different ways. This structure might be manipulated so that the family is not doing what it thinks it is doing when it reads the narrative of family life written in his diary. He thus tries to set up a situation in which their attempt to do their duty as defined by the story of their Christian destiny, their attempt to repress his story of their temporal destiny, will force them to read this story: "Even if it is only as a matter of duty, you will read these pages to the end" (*VT*, p. 17). He calculates that their effort to repress his criticism will force them to face up to it. In this way he would rewrite the plot of the story of his life which until now has ended in his family's refusal to listen to his version of that story.

Since the immediate goal of Louis's diary is to make its readers do the opposite of what they think they are doing, to force them to demystify the Christian plot that they think they are constructing, it is a deceptive and strategic act of narration. It must make its reader, in particular Louis's wife, think that she is performing an act of Christian duty in accordance with Christian dogma, when in fact she is reading statements of how unchristian this performance can be.

The secret of Louis's narrative strategy is the ambiguity of the written, first-person pronoun. As Thérèse discovered, the "I" points to the act of narration. But if the "I" occurs in a written text, and if it is read after the author has died, then it also becomes a sign of the author's absence. It points to the absent writer's past act of composing his narrative as well as to his wife's present act of narrating what she reads. The written "I" thus splits the reader's present act of narration in two as both a repetition of a dead husband's last words and as an act of narrating his version of family history in the present. This split will put Louis's wife, as his intended reader, into a double bind. On the one hand, if she reads his diary she will be narrating a story that constitutes the last words of her husband. Her act of narration will appear to be virtuous. On the other hand, if she reads it, she will be narrating a story that contradicts her Christian story. Her act of narration will appear to be sinful. The division of the "I" she reads, between the repetition of a past act of narration and the narration of a sinful story, will force her to sin whether or not she reads her

husband's diary. Louis's certainty that she *will* read it is based on his conviction that, once she has begun to perform the formal duty of reading, she will continue, despite what she reads. He uses the ambiguity of the written "I," which refers to two seemingly contradictory acts of narration, as a means of transforming his wife's blind performance of formal, Christian duty, into a reading of a text which tells her that she is not now performing, nor has she ever performed, the Christian deeds she thinks she has been performing. He transforms his act of narration into an act of persuasion: "Perhaps I shall have more authority over you dead than alive" (*VT*, p. 17).

In the ambiguity of the written "I," Louis discovers the persuasive powers of narrative. When Thérèse first discovers the narrative structure that organizes the stories she and her family tell, she concludes that it provides her with a certain knowledge about what direction it gives her life. She feels that she is absent as an agent in this narrative, but present as a witness of what it is doing. She thus posits that narrative implies an author who is present and can be known. When Louis begins writing his diary, he also believes that he understands how it is structured and how it functions. But for him, narrative structure is deceptive. It constantly hides what its implied author is doing with it. A self-confident lawyer, he believes that he can be present in his narrative, as its author, to the extent that he can control how its structures will deceive his reader.¹³

The goal of Louis's persuasive strategy is to rewrite the narrative of how his family will interpret his writing of his diary. Until now they have attributed his story-telling to his sinfulness: "I was poor Papa, who had to be prayed for a lot, and whose conversion had to be obtained" (*VT*, p. 69). He knows that they will try to attribute the writing of his diary to the same cause. The narrative of how they will try to read a text contradicting their prejudices culminates in its repression. His strategy is to change this plot and replace it with a hidden one that culminates in their recognizing their act of repression. This recognition of error, he hopes, will bring his wife to act in a truly charitable way towards him: "What if I do not wait until I am dead to hand over these pages to you? . . . What if you opened your arms to me?" (*VT*, p. 105).

Louis is not trying to make his wife stop telling her formal, Christian story. He only wants her to stop taking it literally. He would like her to realize that he has questioned her superficially charitable life in order to make her aware of true charity and that he has mocked

Christian dogma in order to express his true Christian love for her: "What force is drawing me?" he says of his writing, "A blind force? Love? Perhaps love . . ." (*VT*, p. 106). Louis's narrative strategy is thus to make his wife accept his version of why he wrote his diary and how she should read it. Then his writing and her reading will become acts of mutual love consisting in his acceptance that her adaptation to dogma, and her acceptance that his rebellion against dogma, are mere stories that must not be taken literally.

But by disclosing the ambiguous narrative structure with which he hopes to manipulate his wife's reading, and by showing that his diary may not be doing what his wife thinks it is doing, Louis raises the possibility that he himself may not know what he is doing in writing his diary and that he may not know how it will be read. Although he does not at first realize it, his act of narration is so ambiguous that it destroys his credibility. When he first addresses his wife he pompously proclaims:

Don't be alarmed—there is no question here of my funeral eulogy written by myself in advance, any more than there is of a tirade against you. The dominant feature of my character, which would have struck any other wife but you, is my frightful lucidity. That skill in deceiving oneself, which helps most men to live, has always been lacking in me. [I have never had base feelings without being aware of it beforehand.] (*VT*, p. 14; [*NDV*, p. 17])

In giving his reasons for writing to his wife, Louis tries to convince her that his "I," unlike hers, can say what it is doing. But although he says that he is not praising himself, he nonetheless praises his lucidity, and although he says that he is not indicting her, he condemns her desire to deceive herself. This contradiction between what he says he is doing and what his rhetoric makes him appear to be doing raises serious doubts about whether he can say why he is writing his diary.¹⁴ The more he argues that his written attacks on his wife's beliefs are lucid and loving, the more his readers can argue that his statements of lucidity and love are mere means of persuading them that he is right.

The true drama in *Le Noeud de vipères* takes place when Louis reads his own diary, an act that makes him realize the gap between what his narrative "I" states that it is doing and what his rhetoric implies that it is doing. As his own reader, Louis constantly discovers that his written "I" simply cannot perform the deed it says it is

performing: "I read over these lines which I wrote yesterday evening in a kind of delirium. How could I have let my [rage] carry me away like that?" (*VT*, p. 28; [*NDV*, p. 36]). He cannot say what his narrative is doing, either while he is writing it or when he rereads it.

Eventually Thérèse also becomes her own "reader" and realizes that her act of narration is condemned to ambiguity: "Why is it," she asks her husband, "that every story I tell you sounds so false?" (*TD**, p. 178). She listens to her own act of narration in the same way that Louis reads his diary. *Le Noeud de vipères* situates her problem in a failure to control the process by which narrative represents or misrepresents itself. The consequence of this failure is two radically contradictory readings of what narrative is doing. Either it is a pure act of persuasion or it is an act of expression. Mauriac expresses this ambiguity of the act of narration in the form of two readings of Louis's diary, both written after his death. His son concludes that Louis's diary is a pure act of persuasion: "Lawyer as he was, he was reluctant to lose his case, either in his own eyes, or in ours" (*VT*, p. 193). But his granddaughter replies, although she has not been permitted to read her grandfather's diary, that it in fact expresses his conversion: "I would swear that, on this point, the document which you do not want to let me read brings decisive witness" (*VT*, p. 199). Mauriac's novel thus leaves its reader with two contradictory readings of its act of narration: one as a prideful effort to persuade the reader to accept Christian doctrine; the other as a humble effort to express a Christian message of humility and love. Because neither Thérèse nor Louis can choose between contradictory self-representations, neither *Thérèse Desqueyroux* nor *Le Noeud de vipères* can be reduced to a plot that represents how they were written nor predict how they will be read.

Since Louis cannot construct a plot that accurately represents his act of narration, he defines the final transition from the "I" of his diary to the "he" of his son's and niece's letters as a sign of a much greater alienation than the one described by Thérèse. Thérèse discovers that her "I" was a "she" being written by a formal narrative structure. At the end of the novel, she also realizes that her story of how the "family machinery" represses her actions was also misleading. She is so radically estranged from her own actions that she cannot say why she committed her crime: "All the reasons I might have given you . . . would have seemed deceitful to me . . ." (*TD**, p. 175). But Louis's realization that he cannot say whether his diary is an act of expression or persuasion uncovers a more fundamental estrangement of the

"I" from its act of narration. He cannot say whether his narrative act is doing anything at all. How can his act of narration be an act if it does not change its author ("There is nothing in me . . . which does not belong to the monster which I set up against the world, and to whom I gave my name" [VT, p. 174]), or its reader ("What madness . . . to hope . . . to impose upon them a new idea of the man that . . . I always have been! We only see what we are accustomed to seeing" [VT, p. 177]). All implied authors or readers, as sources of truth or as actors, are absent from his diary.

Narrative in these two novels is motivated by a force that kills off all plots and implied authors. But does not this statement imply that they have a plot whose conclusion is the revelation of the death of plot and implied authors? The two novels in fact construct radically contradictory plots to explain the death of plot. Death, Louis tells us, is "what does not exist, what can only be expressed by a sign" (NDV, p. 88). When Thérèse discovers the death of all the plots and implied authors that she imagined, she concludes that this death is a sign of the role chance plays in her life. Thus her last, non-tragic act: "She walked . . . according to her whim, [au hasard]" (TD, p. 184). But Louis sees this death as a sign of the role that necessity has played in his life. God has destroyed all the voices that Louis believed truthful in order to humble his prideful belief that he could say what he was doing, that he could represent his destiny. Both characters once again attribute plots to the narratives of their lives, although with totally different endings, and they invent implied authors responsible for these plots, either a purely structural otherness or a divine Other. But their comments on plot make it abundantly clear that they are aware of the arbitrariness of their choices. Such plots are at most Pascalian *paris*.

Far from being expressions of Christian ideology, *Thérèse Desqueyroux* and *Le Noeud de vipères* call into question the very foundations upon which such an ideology could find narrative expression. Rather than impose a linear Christian destiny on the narratives of their characters' lives, these novels undermine all such plots by bringing to the fore the ambiguity of any act of narration. Indeed, Mauriac's "Christian" gesture, if it is Christian, is to reveal that his narrative cannot express Christian ideology. He makes his reader aware of how ambiguous his act of narration can be. He thus presents the reader with an arbitrary choice, only one of which is to accept Christian ideology.

NOTES

1. See Jean-Paul Sartre, "M. Francois Mauriac et la liberté," in *Situations I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), pp. 36-57. Sartre believes that Mauriac uses an omniscient, third-person narrator in *La Fin de la nuit* in order to impose a Christian destiny on his characters' thoughts and actions. He feels that Mauriac hypocritically calls his characters free only when they choose the destiny that the author, like God, has chosen for them. Third-person narrators, Sartre states, should only speak about "others, in other words, an opaque object, someone of whom we only see the exterior." It would be best to avoid the third person completely, for "the novelistic ambiguity of the 'third person,' . . . draws us into an intimacy which logically should be expressed in the first person." In novels, the third person tends to deceive us into thinking that we can transcend the limits of our consciousness and know the thoughts of another person. For Sartre, omniscient, third-person narration hides not only our ignorance about others, but also our lack of control over their lives. Were novelists like Mauriac to use "the vertiginous intimacy of the 'I,'" they would introduce their readers into the inner world of their characters where both readers and characters might discover their existential freedom from the dictates of an author or a god (my translations).
2. See Gerald Prince, "*Le Noeud de vipères* ou les destinations du récit," *Orbis Litterarum* 31 (1976), 77-78, for an important exception to this neglect. Prince discusses what Louis has to say about the absence of a "destinataire" from his narrative, an absence closely linked to the absence of a narrative voice.
3. See Gérard Genette, *Nouveau Discours du récit* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), pp. 64-77, for a summary of the current debate and for the reasons why he rejects the significance not only of person, but also of transitions between person, what he calls "transvocalisation."
4. François Mauriac, *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, in *Thérèse*, trans. Gerard Hopkins (New York: Noonday Press, 1964). and *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, *Livre de Poche* (Paris: Grasset, 1927). All quotations from the translation will be followed by "TD" and the page number in parentheses. My translations from the French edition will be followed by "TD*" and the page number in parentheses.
5. Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, introd. Francis Fergusson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963). The term "plot-making" is borrowed from Fergusson. Also see Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), pp. 55-84, for a careful reading of Aristotle's notion of *mimesis* as *muthos*, "la mise en intrigue," as plot-making. The notion that Aristotle's theory of plot implies an inner coherence whose "logic" is one of persuasion and whose success is based on opinion is also taken from Ricoeur.

6. Genette, *Nouveau Discours*, p. 65. "In my eyes, every narrative is, explicitly or not, 'in the first person,' since its narrator can at any moment designate himself with that pronoun" (my translation).
7. Emile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 251-57 (my translation).
8. Gérard Genette, "Discours du récit," in *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 206-11.
9. Thérèse's rejection of Jean's mystical theories implies that even modernist novels, those that claim to escape linear plot, contain a plot in the form of a plot to undermine plot. However, her subsequent comments, as well as Louis's, add that the tendency of narrative to reduce itself to a unified plot is only one structural "function" among several that co-exist within narrative.
10. See André Joubert, *François Mauriac et Thérèse Desqueyroux* (Paris: Nizet, 1982), for an argument that the transition from first- to third-person narration does signify a return to objectivity.
11. See Marc Eli Blanchard, *Description: Sign, Self, Desire* (The Hague: Mouton, 1980), for a discussion of how narrative can question plot by resisting it.
12. François Mauriac, *Vipers Tangle*, Image Books (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 167; and *Le Noeud de vipères*, Livre de Poche (Paris: Grasset, 1933). Most quotations are from the English translation and are followed by "VT" and the page number in parentheses. My translations from the French edition are in brackets and/or followed by "NDV" and the page number in parentheses.
13. It should be noted that Thérèse uses a quite similar strategy to make Bernard listen to her and free her, although she does not articulate what she is doing. After he imprisons her, she begins to starve herself. This act makes her dying body a concrete symbol of how his tyranny is destroying her as a free individual. Bernard realizes that her dying body makes him appear to be her murderer, a grave danger to his reputation as an honorable family man. He is obliged to take her demands for freedom seriously and let her leave quietly for Paris where she will not starve herself. Thérèse thus puts Bernard in a situation where his effort to construct the family story, to make others believe that his wife is still faithful, in fact goes against it, for he must allow her to abandon him.
14. See John T. Booker, "Mauriac's *Noeud de vipères*: Time and Writing," *Symposium* 35 (1981), 102-15, for a discussion of how the present of writing encroaches on the past of Louis's story.