

JULIAN'S WITHDRAWAL

Francois Mauriac as a Psychologist

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On one occasion when the writer had told a French lady that his scientific attitude towards life implied atheism, she became sad and, led by the hidden goal to convert him, gave him several novels by Francois Mauriac, usually considered as one of France's best contemporary novelists.

Mauriac was certainly a wiser choice than had been Paul Claudel, another great Catholic poet, for he is extremely dogmatic. Did he not, in an ode, implore the Lord not to abandon him along with the Voltaires and the Renans, the Michelets and the Hugos, "and all the other infamous men"?--Mauriac quoted these lines somewhat disapprovingly when welcoming Claudel amongst the "forty immortals" of the "Académie Française" in 1947. He considers himself as a "Catholic who writes novels," which is not the same as a writer of Catholic novels. In a postscript to "The Loved and the Unloved" (Galigai, 1952) he replied to critics who found him not "Catholic" enough that "the artist should have no concern beyond painting to the best of his ability and placing what he has painted...in the best possible light." He also said that for him to create a work of art from the study of human vices, was an end in itself.

The possession of a clear insight into people's motives, together with the power to paint character and to create a fascinating atmosphere, has enabled him to write numerous novels which read like case histories, discerned as by an Adler and transformed by an artist into fine literature. Here, by way of illustration, is a description of how Julian Revolou in "The Unknown Sea" (Les Chemins de la Mer, 1939), creates his own neurosis.

Julian's younger brother Denis, who considers him a fool, is aware that the mother prefers the two boys to their sister Rose, whom indeed, without of course being aware of it, she discourages by continuous nagging and disparagement.

Whereas the behavior of Denis is free and unconventional, Julian, the elder, has developed perfect manners which are admired by society as long as his father, a prosperous lawyer, is a rich man and Julian himself "the biggest matrimonial catch" in the provincial town. This contrasting style of life of the two brothers is in line with what Adler found about the family constellation.

After Oscar Revolou, the father, has squandered the family's fortune and come to a disgraceful end by committing suicide, Julian, unprepared for independence and now cold-shouldered by society, has a "nervous breakdown." The poet puts it like this:

"Julian, stripped of everything on which he had leaned in this world for support, had become a mere rag of a man, an ageless

creature with a receding forehead, thinning hair and a weak chin; a shortsighted man who had lost his spectacles and could not bear (to hear): "You are the head of the family now. "'

Being afraid of responsibility, because as a spoilt child he was totally unprepared for it, Julian refuses to take decisions in order to save what remains of the father's business and property: he withdraws and leaves the whole task to Landon, the head clerk upon whom his father had been utterly dependent. Landon says to Denis: "Your brother Julian has shut himself in his room. He says he won't come out but will let himself starve to death. That mood will pass, but we need him. He is the only one of all of you who is of age..." Yet when Denis tries to make him aware of his responsibility, Julian argues: "If I was mad or a half-wit, you could do without me ... well, I am ... From now on I shall never leave my bed ... You're too young to understand the extent of my fall ... You don't know what it means socially to be a Revolou ... the position to which that name entitled one ... I couldn't have climbed higher, as I realize only too well ..."

This "you are too young to understand" is the neurotic's way of saying: "It is unfortunate that you understand my escape into irresponsibility!"

Julian announces: "I shall behave with scrupulous dignity."

The German word for "dignity" is Würde, etymologically related to Wert meaning "worth." This consideration makes the worthless grandiloquence of Julian appear very undignified. What does the neurotic consider as behaving with "scrupulous dignity?" He says: "I have already resigned from the Club."

Perhaps a really worthy person might have acted likewise in a moment of family crisis, but only in order to spend every moment of his time in ameliorating the family's status.

Our "rag of a man" continues: "I have accepted my role as victim, and shall just disappear, disappear as utterly as a man can whose principles forbid him to take his own life." With his strongly biased apperception of a disheartened vain creature, he could not admit that the religion forbidding suicide also demands love of neighbor, i.e. working for his family. Having uttered the great moral principle, Julian adds: "Let that filthy Landon—who's really responsible for all that has happened--scheme away to his heart's content."

So Julian is the victim and all the others are unjustly against him. The offending reasonableness of Denis must be pushed aside by declaring he's too young. The really splendid help of Landon must be blackened by slandering him. And no word about the guilty father. Of course! His life goal of irresponsible pleasure still is the guiding fiction of the son! Although in another context Julian admitted that a man might commit suicide in unbearable circumstances, he neither follows his father's example nor would he accuse him. He develops a severe neurosis in the form of a complete withdrawal from life.

We know that with a being whose potential social interest was not developed in the decisive first year of his life, everything is fine as long as there are no difficulties; yet as soon as they occur, he will

create such further difficulties as will allow him to retain in his own eyes a certain self-esteem, in spite of his being beaten.

Julian's father had the unfaltering services of his wife whom he treated like a slave. Julian, the son, knows that now his widowed mother will continue in her slavish attitude and devote herself entirely to him. He must also assume that Landon will continue to render his devoted services. Julian will never put this into words, but these certainties allow him to exclude suicide and to build up his particular neurosis of extreme inactivity. It even pleases his vanity to make seemingly clever play with pathological concepts. Mauriac has him say to his brother: "If I was a neurasthenic, you'd have to manage without me. Well, I am--I can't bear anybody to see me. I can't bear to meet people!" He is at a point where his neurosis might still appear as malingering. But even a genuine neurosis is the product of training.

Describing poetically the creation of his hero's neurosis (which term embraces what used to be called "neurasthenia"), after he had fallen into a state of complete discouragement on account of outside difficulties and his "coping index" (Weissmann) had turned to zero, Mauriac says:

"He was like a bird making his nest. He settled down into his mania, building its protective side higher and higher, hollowing out a little hole, padding it with feathers, snuggling down inside."

Julian lived on as such a man, uncooperative and unhelpful and a heavy burden for his widowed mother, who by her slavery for him degraded her own human dignity; but this was merely the continuation of the attitude she had already adopted during her life with an egocentric husband.

With this "study of human vice," i.e. of a rich neurotic who chose to withdraw from life when it had ceased to pamper him, Mauriac has indeed created a work of art. I will also have a moral value for those readers, believers and unbelievers alike, who, by increasing their understanding of human errors through such studies, may act more efficiently to avoid them in their own lives and those of their children, for whom pampering means poison.

Not as an artist, but as a scholar in the field of understanding and educating children, Adler would say that if the child did not find any difficulties in his existence, the educator would have to create some, so as to give the child a training in overcoming better and better growing problems, which are inherent in human life.

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