

Trees, Woods and Literature—13

Week followed week without so much as a drop of rain. Bernard lived in constant fear of fire. He was suffering from his heart again. More than a thousand acres had been burned over at Louchats. "If the wind had been from the north I should have lost my Balisac pines." Therese was in a state of waiting for she knew not what to fall from the immutable sky. It would never rain again. One day the whole surrounding forest would crackle into flame, even the town itself would not be spared. Why was it that the heath villages never caught fire? It seemed to her unjust that it should always be the trees that the flames chose, never the human beings. In the family circle there was a never-ending discussion about what caused these disasters. Was it a discarded cigarette, or was it deliberate mischief? Therese liked to imagine that one of these nights she would get up, leave the house, reach the most inflammable part of the forest, throw away her cigarette, and watch the great column of smoke stain the dawn sky . . . But she drove the thought from her, for the love of pine-trees was in her blood. It was not them that she hated.

From *Therese Desqueyroux* by Francois Mauriac, translated by Gerard Hopkins. Reprinted by kind permission of Messrs. Eyre and Spottiswoode, Ltd.

Francois Mauriac was born in Bordeaux, in south west France, in 1885, and his many novels are concerned with the lives of the bourgeois inhabitants of that region of vineyards, *landes* and pine forests. They deal with intense human emotions, family entanglements, religious hypocrisy, and greedy manoeuvring for rights over property.

Therese Desqueroux is driven by circumstances to attempt the murder of her husband, but the family withhold incriminating evidence at the hearing of charges, and she is subsequently kept a prisoner behind a facade of normal family behaviour. "Family honour" must be preserved.

Mauriac died in 1970. Despite his achievements, and the award of a Nobel Prize for literature in 1952, he does not appear to be highly regarded among English critics.