

# NOTES AND REVIEWS

## Silence as an Element of Dialogue in Claude Mauriac's *L'Agrandissement*

Susan Sontag recently observed that most art in our time has been experienced by audiences as a move into silence, unintelligibility, invisibility, or inaudibility.<sup>1</sup> She has also made a valid analogy between today's art and religion. If today's religion is essentially a theology of God's absence, then art must tend toward anti-art, the elimination of the "subject," the "object," the "image," the substitution of change for intention, and the pursuit of silence.<sup>2</sup>

In his tetralogy, titled significantly *Le Dialogue intérieur*,<sup>3</sup> Claude Mauriac, the eldest son of François Mauriac, examines silence as an element of dialogue, of communication and knowledge. He considers interior dialogue not only between characters, but between authors and/or narrators and their characters: "C'est le dialogue intérieur non plus seulement des héros romanesques entre eux, mais de ces héros avec le romancier, qui, s'il leur a donné l'existence, n'en a pas moins beaucoup à apprendre d'eux."<sup>4</sup>

Silence for Mauriac appears as the furthest extension of that reluctance to communicate, that ambivalence about making contact with an audience or a character, which is a leading motif of modern art, with its tireless commitment to the "new" and/or the esoteric. However, Mauriac's utilization of the myth of silence is also positive in nature. Mauriac, in fact, is telling us that even silence or ruptured dialogue can constitute grounds for aesthetic affirmation. Regardless of its elements of complaint or indictment, silence remains inescapably a form of speech, an element in a dialogue. In his attempt to solicit a "total experience," silent dialogue or sub-conversation with narrators and/or characters appears to be the solution to Mauriac's dilemma of communication.<sup>5</sup> Mauriac tells us

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<sup>1</sup>*Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969): "Modern art's chronic habit of displeasing, provoking, or frustrating its audience can be regarded as a limited, vicarious participation in the ideal of silence which has been elevated as a major standard of 'seriousness' in contemporary aesthetics" (p. 7).

<sup>2</sup>Sontag, pp. 4-5.

<sup>3</sup>The novels of the tetralogy, *Le Dialogue intérieur*, are listed below in the order of their composition and French publication:

*Toutes les femmes sont fatales* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1957).

*All Women are Fatal*. Trans. by Richard Howard (New York: George Braziller, 1957).

*Le Dîner en ville* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1958). *The Dinner Party*. Trans. by Merloyd Lawrence (New York: George Braziller, 1959).

*La Marquise sortit à cinq heures* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1961).—*The Marquise Went Out at Five*. Trans. by Richard Howard (New York: George Braziller, 1961).

*L'Agrandissement* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1963).

<sup>4</sup>Claude Mauriac, *L'Agrandissement* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1963), p. 53. All subsequent page references are to this edition.

<sup>5</sup>"Mais ce qui compte surtout pour lui et dès cette ouverture de son oeuvre, c'est, ainsi que son titre général l'indique, LA COMMUNICATION" (p. 16).

communication has become buried under an almost insupportable burden of self-consciousness. Language is no longer experienced as something to be shared, but as dead weight, corrupted by historical accumulation. There is a devaluation of language and character in Mauriac's work, and as the prestige of language and character falls, that of silence rises.

*L'Aggrandissement* (1963) is the last and the yet untranslated novel of the tetralogy. All the novels which make up the series are "new" by virtue of their technical similarities with the work of Nathalie Sarraute and Michel Butor, among others. But in *L'Aggrandissement* ("The Enlargement" or "Blowup," a term borrowed from photography), Mauriac becomes for the first time a pioneer by writing what may be described as an essay on the novel in the form of a novel. The tetralogy has been compared to Samuel Beckett's trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*) in the single respect that each successive novel narrows the scope allowed to its predecessor. In Beckett's series there is a progressive constriction of space and number of characters; in Mauriac's, the narrowing affects only time.<sup>6</sup>

*Le Dialogue intérieur* is announced for the first time opposite the title page of *L'Aggrandissement*. The silent communication, sometimes consisting of the author's dialogue with his characters, is multiplied in the two final novels of the series. The interior dialogue constitutes a veritable obsession for the writer in *L'Aggrandissement*: "Quelle énergie il me faudrait pour retenir ce projet de l'agrandissement, alors que me préoccupe seule, de nouveau, ma vieille idée de toujours, ce dialogue intérieur obsédant, dont j'ai si souvent mais si mal parlé?" (p. 142).

Mauriac stresses the intellectual superiority of silent communication between authors and characters, and authors and readers for, as he implies, spoken dialogue is often misused, utilized to communicate only the insignificant and trivial: "Dans la réalité, nous ne prenons le plus souvent la parole que si nous n'avons rien à dire. Lorsqu'un sujet important est en cause nous nous entretenons rarement de lui" (p. 19).

Mauriac is preoccupied with depicting a reality consisting of simultaneous thoughts, spoken words, and tacit communication. His "dialogue intérieur" is at best a first cousin of the familiar interior monologue and a blood brother of what Nathalie Sarraute calls "sous-conversation."<sup>7</sup> Mauriac's technique calls for a convergence or confrontation between two interior monologues.<sup>8</sup> Within this construction the reader seems to recognize a "participant ego" and an "observing ego," meaning that while one part of the writer is giving his fantasies full rein in free association, another part (in the form of a character, most often) is watching

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<sup>6</sup>*Toutes les femmes sont fatales* (1957), the first novel of the series, is divided into four chapters, each concerned with a single afternoon, evening, or night in the life of its narrator-hero, Bertrand Carnéjoux, journalist but not yet novelist. *Le Dîner en ville* (1958) presents the spoken dialogue and unspoken thoughts of eight people at a dinner party given by Bertrand—now the author of one novel—and his young wife, Martine. *La Marquise sortit à cinq heures* (1961) describes a single hour, from 5 to 6 p.m. in the contemporary history of a Paris intersection, the Carrefour de Bucy. *L'Aggrandissement* (1963) deals finally with the first two minutes of the same hour ("... et *L'Aggrandissement* qui voici, à peine deux minutes" p. 197), enlarging four pages of the text of the preceding book to almost two hundred pages.

<sup>7</sup>*The Age of Suspicion: Essays on the Novel* Trans. by Maria Jolas (New York: George Braziller, 1963).

<sup>8</sup>"Convergence et coïncidence, à défaut de communication. Je pense ce que tu penses sans savoir que tu le penses et tu ignores, toi aussi, cette rencontre (p. 25). C'est aussi et c'est surtout ce qui naît de l'affrontement et de la confrontation de deux monologues intérieurs" (p. 42).

him do so and commenting on the significance of what he is saying. Because the communication is silent, there appears to be no problem with inauthenticity. In fact, Mauriac's "dialogue intérieur" purports to eliminate all inauthenticity.

A unique sight-sound structure characterizes Mauriac's interior dialogue scheme. The author re-creates through interior dialogue the sweet sight of stability and permanence which the harsh sound of the actual ebb and flow of reality negates. Silent communication maintains a sharp difference between the imagined appearance and the heard reality. In *L'Agrandissement* Bertrand Carnéjoux, the character-novelist, looks out at the Carrefour from his balcony and meditates upon the book he hopes to write. Often, Carnéjoux is interrupted in his fantasizing and imaginary wanderings by the ringing of a phone in the empty apartment above him or the buzzing of a fly around him. One disturbing sound corrupts his land of dreams, negates all the things that he as novelist wants to take in, and causes him to deny the world. Sight and silence become linked in the mind of the writer with the nurturing experience of infancy, with the uncompromising state of childhood (p. 29).

Opposed to the metaphor of sight is that of blindness, a motif which is underscored at various points in the narrative. Several references are made to an "aveugle," and more precisely to the irreconcilable punishment by blindness which the narrator fearfully brushes aside.<sup>9</sup> We are given to understand also that Carnéjoux himself is blind as he fumbles for a book (one of his previous novels) which is to aid him in the writing of his current work (pp. 82, 85). If blindness contradicts sight, it is still in close alignment with silence. As blindness compensates for an absence with a greater sensitivity and awareness, so silence compensates for a lack of spoken communication with a more intimate rapport, allowing authors, readers, and characters to loosen boundaries between self and non-self, inner and outer, as well as past, present, and future.

Equally relevant to the ego-regression syndrome manifest in Mauriac's silent dialogue scheme is the obsession Carnéjoux displays with a certain imaginary character he identifies as "l'homme noir," a fixation almost as time-consuming as the interior dialogue itself. There are more than thirty references to this black man within the text. The "story" of *L'Agrandissement* consists principally of the mute interchange between Carnéjoux at his window and the Negro in the street below. In his frustrated attempt to communicate with his dark half, an interpenetration is attained until the narrator begins to grow like him or is forced to imitate him: "Tel Descartes à sa fenêtre, sachant que je suis un homme, et même un homme de couleur" (p. 26). Tearing down boundaries between his self and non-self, inner and outer, linking subjectivity with objectivity, the author-narrator attempts to fuse the edges harmoniously without confusing them (p. 35). It is by means of his confrontation with "l'homme noir" that Carnéjoux experiences the beginning of a sense of identity. "L'homme noir" is more than any other character a reflection of the narrator, as he acknowledges to his readers "tel ce jeune homme de race noire que j'ai inventé à mon image" (p. 109). Finally, it is the narrator (Carnéjoux-Mauriac) himself who decides that "l'homme noir" will play an important role in the life-art illusion: "Là, devant moi, un peu à gauche. Au centre de mon livre, de ma vie, où ce noir, qui sur ma droite arrive comme au ralenti, voudrait prendre la première place—dans ma vie, dans mon livre. Et s'agit-il vraiment des deux phrases clefs?" (p. 62).

Also pertinent to interior dialogue and its sight-sound structure within *L'Agrandissement* is the encumbering sense of immobility which both author-

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<sup>9</sup>"La seule punition irrémédiable serait d'être aveugle . . ." (pp. 81-86).

narrator and characters incessantly sustain. The pursuit of quiescence and immobility is so adamant in *L'Aggrandissement* that Mauriac even makes the immobilization of time a persistent leitmotif. Carnéjoux's ultimate aim as a novelist (clearly Mauriac's as well) is once stated in capital letters: "L'IMMOBILISATION DU TEMPS, mon cher, ni plus ni moins: L'IMMOBILISATION DU TEMPS" (p. 101).

An important connection is made in Mauriac's work between motor inhibition and regression into fantasy. In short, ability or inability to act upon the external world seems connected with the same ability to regress into fantasy. Activity in the inner world and activity in the outer seem mutually exclusive. Even verbal exchange, carries with it a responsibility to the outside world and binds one to external reality.

Consequently, Mauriac must ultimately reduce his novel to self-conscious theorizing and intellectualization. Even his author-character dialogue confrontation never really gets off the ground. It seems to linger in the realm of theory, more a hypothesis than a "reality." Often italics are used to differentiate the narrator's voice from the character's, thereby conveying the "illusion" of an interview taking place (see pp. 19-20). At other times there is no exchange at all, only the hinted possibility of an exchange which may occur sometime in the future (p. 54).

Since there are no "stage directions" to indicate who is speaking or thinking at any given moment, the reader must identify the speaker or thinker by virtue of his or her uniqueness; at any rate, within the limited frame of reference of the characters. Interior dialogue is really a kind of telepathic exchange. It is hardly possible to list in full all the subtle shades that Carnéjoux's meditation imparts to the concept of interior dialogue. Essentially, however, *L'Aggrandissement* may be viewed as mainly a combination of dialogue with oneself (interior monologue) with the type consisting of an author's dialogue with his characters. But "dialogue with" is a misleading phrase. What Carnéjoux actually does is to let each of his characters speak for a while in turn (see pp. 183-84).

Ultimately, the real explanation behind the silent, mute dialogue, captured and preserved under glass, must lie with "L'agrandissement" itself: the enlargement or blowup. Mauriac constructs a prolongation and projection of time, capturing its instantaneity and then immobilizing it as in a photograph. Along with time, the characters and their discourse are immobilized, until what is perceived can only be a dialogue of glimmers: "*L'agrandissement est une forme particulièrement attachante de tirage car il permet une mise en page, un cadrage plus parfaits et des interventions nombreuses . . . Le photographe qui tire son cliché non plus par contact mais par projection compose son image comme 'une véritable oeuvre d'art' . . . Un livre où tout serait donné dans l'instant, comme sur une photo. Une de mes plus anciennes et de mes plus folles ambitions*" (p. 100). Mauriac's ambitious folly can only be justified in view of the creation of a "veritable work of art."

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