Foreword

Charles Morgan's narrative of the later-nineteenth-century affair between simple, good, Charentais viniculteur Barbet Hazard, and Thérèse Despreux, illegitimate daughter of local Catholic priest Father Lancret, celebrated Paris *diseuse* and emblematic free woman, is surely one of the twentieth century's most magical love stories.

Beset by encroaching phylloxera and grasping relatives who want his vines, Barbet is nonetheless a happy man, content to live quietly, produce his cognac, cooper his barrels, listen to the birds, and be kind to the prisoners in the municipal cells which are, rather bizarrely, attached to his farmhouse. A Protestant, he talks keenly about sin and God with his friend Thérèse's father, the priest afflicted with great sexual guilt. Something of a Dostoevskian Holy Fool – Morgan said that his novel was 'a fantasy about a "fool of God"' – Barbet one day lets his prisoners go. This makes him a transgressor in the eyes of law and state, but only affirms our sense of his true goodness. Not dissimilarly, we're persuaded that Thérèse, a country girl classically corrupted in the big city, hedonistically enjoying her numerous lovers, is a truly good woman (shades of Sonia Marmeladov, the good prostitute in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*). It feels inevitable that Barbet, the wise man of the provincial earth – 'modest of spirit', 'shy before God' – should end up in bed with earthy Thérèse, albeit only after hundreds of pages of their to-ings and fro-ings between country and city, protracted separations, and disjunctive epistolary contacts. What the morally harsh, and nicely satirized, women-folk of the Charente think of as sin is demonstrated as a triumphantly real love. Morgan's fiction is utterly God-conscious – and constantly reminds one of those Catholic novelists, the English Graham Greene, and the French François Mauriac and Georges Bernanos

– but its Christianity, uniting both Protestant Barbet and Catholic Lancret, is post-dogmatic. Love is insisted on as precisely the forgiveness of sins.

This novel is a wonderful rhapsody of modern love in a period of cultural and religious change – of love in a time, as it were, of moral phylloxera. And it's a specifically French rhapsody – a panegyric, in fact, to French being, French spirit, the 'human goodness' of France that's mapped onto a most detailed topography of France, especially of the Charente region, which Morgan knew well, and late nineteenth-century Paris, which he painstakingly got right through much research in old maps. Morgan finished his novel on June 1st 1940, as France was being overrun by German armies. He dedicated it to 'the French man and woman who have deepened my love for their country'. His dedication is dated 25th July 1940, a month after Hitler entered Paris. Morgan had written to his dedicatees offering them his novel, but had received no reply. He can't name them, he says, 'because if they live, they are within the power of the enemy.' These friends were Germaine Delamain, Morgan's French translator, and her husband Jacques. Morgan had stayed with them in Jarnac, in the heart of cognac country, fabled location of historic French Protestant struggles (and patent original of Barbet's hometown of 'Roussignac'), where he had learned all about vine culture, barrel making, and so forth, for his novel.

Jacques Delamain, Protestant wine-maker and famous ornithologist – he assisted in the researches into bird-sounds that went in the great mystic French composer Messiaen's *Réveil des Oiseaux* – is, of course, the original of Barbet. Barbet has what Morgan praises, in his introduction to the 1952 stage-version of his novel *The River Line*, as the 'Power to receive the gift of interior quiet': it was Delamain's gift (he's the 'French soldier' of the Great War, fabled according to that Introduction for observing 'during an interval in the bombardment of his trench, that swallows were late that spring'). This interior quietness, the

mysterious force of Barbet the quick observer of the smallest bird-life, quells the angers of his most murderous prisoners, makes even the most sophisticated and bohemian of Thérèse's Paris friends attend to him as a kind of prophet, and founds Thérèse's desire for him.

The novel's Dedication believes that the traditional Midsummer Eve bonfires of the Charente – they feature in the novel – will one day, after the Nazi 'dark ages' have passed, be relighted, 'for France is an idea necessary to civilisation'. Morgan means the civilisation of Barbet and Thérèse, as he spelled it out in what is a kind of gloss on his novel, in his contemporary lecture actually entitled 'France is an Idea Necessary to Civilisation' (he published it in his second series of *Reflections in a Mirror*, 1946). This civilisation is a matter of sturdy individulaism; of not puritanically separating 'sensuous pleasure' from the idea of 'the good life'; of taking art in one's stride. To the French, 'an artist is, like a peasant, natural and necessary'. This assumption about art is what grants Thérèse's repertoire of hit-songs about rural Barbet their attraction and power; it makes their union seem both natural and necessary. (Morgan's *diseuse* is based, not accidentally, on Yvette Guilbert, the comedienne *chanteuse* made world-famous in sketches by Toulouse-Lautrec.)

A major strain in the private myth of Barbet and Thérèse is their talk of making a voyage: as pointed in the novel's title. To voyage is to assert the individualism that the novel prizes, to break out of the clamps of custom and dogma. But rather as with Calvinist predestination, you can only break out as you are enabled: it's a matter of accepting your grace, of receiving your private miracle. Not all of Barbet's freed prisoners can bear their unexpected liberation. It's a life-mistake not to. (The germ, in fact, of *The Voyage* was an amusing newspaper story Morgan read about a French prisoner who was let out by his gaoler and complained to the authorities that he'd been vexatiously deprived of board and lodging.) Father Lancret, happily, will at

last learn to go through what's described as the door of forgiveness which, in some of the many words of Jesus that the novel likes drawing on, opens to those who knock on it. Barbet and Thérèse accept their particular grace by trusting themselves to the river Seine and the timetable vagaries of its riverboats, which carry them to the union they've long desired.

Morgan's river scenes are quite wonderful. They help make *The Voyage* one of the very best river novels in English. Our river-borne couple keep recalling two famous lovers from the tradition whose affairs also involve river-boats – George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver and Stephen Guest in *The Mill on the Floss*, and Henry James's Madame de Vionnet and Chad Newsome in *The Ambassadors*. But with an immense difference in each case. James's pair are sealed in their transgressive, adulterous relationship when they're spotted happily sharing the handling of a sail-boat; whereas Morgan's pair are shown enjoying a love beyond any such traditional sense of guilty wrong-doing. For their part, Maggie and Stephen refuse to take the opportunity for free love, and an affair outside of marriage, that is offered to them when tide and time carry them downstream. But Barbet and Thérèse, this magical, blessed couple, blissful breakers of all the old codes, sail on and on. They sail right on, in fact, out of the novel; their destination is unknown, except that it involves their continuing love, and letting their grace – Morgan's resonant, revised model of God's grace – carry them whither it will. As fictional endings go, this one is truly hard to beat.

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