Phedre au labyrinthe

Emily Denise Leary

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PHEDRE AU LABYRINTHE

by

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Introduction

The world of Françoise Mallet-Joris is a semblance of reality formed by lies and masks. The lies, fabricated to dissimulate fear and frustration, and the masks, cultivated to disguise or conceal diffidence and insecurity, are often the cause of disillusionment and the basis for alienation. In this world, devoid of humor and tenderness, in which the only true reality exists solely in solid and tangible things, a search is being made for strange sensations and exciting experiences on the one hand, and for the knowledge and truth which must exist behind the distorted external appearances on the other. The young Flemish creator of this world is also searching and hers is a quest for truth.

The need which she feels to search for truth is a relatively new experience for the thirty-two year old writer. Until she reached the age of twenty-four she felt no need for anything beyond love, believing that love could arrange everything. At the age of seventeen she married a professor, but this marriage proved to be unsuccessful. Her second husband was a French diplomat. This marriage, too, ended in divorce. By the time she was twenty-four she had been divorced twice and her belief in the power of love was
destroyed. She was completely disillusioned.\footnote{From untitled block sketch of author by Jerry Bauer, Saturday Review (April 28, 1962) p. 18.}

She attended school in Anvers, Belgium, the city in which she was born in 1930. During a portion of her childhood she was ill and, as a consequence, had to take some of her schooling at home. Mme. Mallet-Joris also studied in Brussels and in Italy and attended a college in the United States near Philadelphia before completing her studies of literature at the Sorbonne. She now lives in Paris with her third husband, Jacques Delfau, a painter, and her four children.

The social, political, and cultural prominence of her parents has undoubtedly contributed greatly to her precocity. Her father, Albert Lilar, is a diplomat and has served as a minister of Justice of Belgium. Suzanne Lilar, her mother, is a dramatist and essayist. Her mother's first play was written in 1948. Since that time she has written other dramas and essays, and has become a member of the Royal Academy of Belgium.\footnote{François Nourissier, "Françoise Mallet-Joris," Vogue (Juin-Juillet), p. 49.}

The transition in her own attitude toward life is reflected in the protagonists of her novels. In the first, Le Rempart des Béguines, Hélène is merely searching for new sensations, excitement, anything that will break the monotony of her everyday existence. In the sequel, La Chambre rouge, while the "loss-of-
innocence theme carries over from the first work, Hélène's life takes on a purpose. Her search begins. At this point, however, the analogy between the writer and her character ends. Hélène's search, although it ultimately leads her to that moment of truth in which she sees herself for what she is, begins as one for revenge; the search that Mme. Mallet-Joris is making is for truth. In her attempt to fill the void wrought by her disillusionment, she developed a need for religion. Until that time she neither had believed in nor felt the need for God. Because her parents had no religion, she had no religious guidance as a child. The concept of God was meaningless to her. With her second divorce came disenchantment with the power of love. Some other force was needed to replace it. She felt the exigency for a new set of values which would prove to be more valid and orient her toward self-realization. This search led her to Roman Catholicism to which she was converted in the early part of 1955. "Conversion," she says, "is a decision, not a solution. It is the beginning of a search for truth. Religion demands that a person think constantly. I had more peace of mind before coming a Catholic. But peace of mind offers little satisfaction in itself." For Mme. Mallet-Joris,

3 Bauer.
4 Bauer.
then, the personal satisfaction derives from the fullest possible exercise of the individual's faculties.

The extent of the search made by Alberte, the major female character of the third novel, *Les Mensonges*, has broadened from that of Hélène, although Alberte has still not reached complete self-realization. In *L'Empire céleste*, the fourth novel, the scope increases in breadth and depth carrying the female protagonist closer to self-fulfillment. *Les Personnages*, her latest novel, reflects a decision reached by Françoise Mallet-Joris. Like the author, the principal character, Louise de la Fayette, turns to religion. The acceptance of a religious life by Louise is like the acceptance of Roman Catholicism by Mme. Mallet-Joris; it is only the real beginning, the point of orientation from which her search must continue.

In 1945 she published in Brussels a series of poems, mainly about nature, which she claims "weren't very good because naturally, I hadn't had enough experience." It was in 1951 that the first of her five novels was published. In her novels, Françoise presents a variety of social and physical environments which have greatly disparate features. Likewise, she has created characters with greatly disparate personalities. Yet when the basic situations

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5 Bauer.
of her characters are examined closely, an underlying similarity is found. These five novels evidence her conviction that dupery is one of the common elements of human relationships. In speaking of the rapport between her heroines, she said, "Elles se sentent un peu dupés, mais elles ne savent pas de quoi. C'est exactement le sentiment que j'éprouvais, quand j'étais petite, à l'égard du monde des grandes personnes." This deception may well be one of the sources of what I consider to be a major characteristic of the novels of Françoise Mallet-Joris. Each of her characters, through his own vanity or cupidity or that of others, is led into an emotional maze founded upon deceit.

This thesis will analyze the labyrinthian world of Françoise Mallet-Joris and present the nature and causes of the basic, common predicament confronting each of her principal characters, considering them in the order in which they were created by the author. In *Le Rempart des Béguines*, Hélène presents the idea of a labyrinth in the following paraphrased quotation from Racine: "Et Phèdre au labyrinthe avec toi descendue, se serait avec toi retrouvée ou perdue..." She was bewildered and confused by her thoughts and the inexplicable feeling of expectation that she had. This quotation is applicable not only to Hélène, but to all the major characters of our author.

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6 Nicole Bernheim, "Françoise Mallet-Joris." Clipping sent to me by the publisher, Julliard--source unknown.

7 *Le Rempart des Béguines*, p. 35.
Plot summaries

*Le Rempart des Béguines*, which is written in the first person, is the story of a fifteen year old girl, Hélène Noris, who lived with her father in the port city of Gers. Her mother had died when she was eight and since that time her sole companion was Julie, the maid. Her father, René Noris, is a successful business man who finds very little time to devote to his daughter. Hélène, bored and lonely, wants attention and diversion. She finds them as she deliberately enters a Lesbian liaison with her father's mistress, Tamara Soullere. The bulk of the story is concerned with the relationship between Tamara and Hélène, and its effect on Hélène. Tamara, portrayed as an extremely strong character, appears to hold femininity in contempt. Hélène is influenced by her perverted attitude but finally discovers that Tamara is guilty of the weakness she so disdains. Tamara marries Hélène's father and becomes an attentive, seemingly faithful wife. Hélène is alone again but she has matured greatly as a result of this experience.

In *La Chambre rouge*, the sequel to *Le Rempart des Béguines*, the narration is resumed by Hélène. The events which she relates take place two years after the close of the first novel. During those two years Hélène has never really forgiven Tamara for having
married her father. The hostility which she feels toward her step-mother culminates in a desire for revenge. It is primarily on this desire and its consequences that the plot is based.

As a part of his campaign to be elected mayor of Gers, René Noris has undertaken to reorganize the local theatrical company. Hired to design the sets as well as supervise the staging of the chosen play is the rich Parisian, Jean Delfau. As the friendship between Jean and Tamara becomes more intimate, Hélène watches and waits. She suspects that the respectable façade which Tamara has built around herself since her marriage will crumble. The mask that Tamara wears in playing the role of the perfect wife is about to be torn away. Tamara is tempted to deceive her husband and thus will betray herself. In an effort to avenge herself by thwarting her step-mother and partially to add a little diversion to her own boring existence, Hélène decides to capture the attentions of Jean herself. Succeeding in her efforts, she produces the desired effect on Tamara. As though trying to prove to herself that she is still a free agent emotionally, she enters into a second affair with one of her classmates, Stanislaw Mierowicz.

Because of Tamara's discovery of the affair with Jean and her threat to reveal it to Hélène's father, Jean and Hélène agree to become engaged as a protective measure. Both of them realize that their relationship will never develop into either true love or
When Jean leaves Gers to return to Paris they know that they will never meet again. Though saved from the responsibilities and anguishes of love, they have lost the benefits that love can also provide.

Les Mensonges, which won for its author the Prix Femina, was published in 1958. In this novel appears a larger number of characters than was found in the two preceding works. Les Mensonges is the story of the aging and ailing Klaes van Baarnheim, a rich and powerful brewmaster of Antwerp. Klaes derives pleasure from playing the role of benefactor to a series of impoverished individuals as well as to his relatives. The former come and go according to his whims; each in his turn is discarded only to be replaced by another. Klaes recognizes his relatives for what they are, availing himself of every opportunity to advert to their parasitic natures.

Around Klaes are his sister, Mme. Nuñez, a gluttonous individual who thrives on mysteries; his nephews, Philippe Brenner, the cunning and hypocritical overseer of Klaes' business enterprises; and Roger Nuñez, his deceitful doctor; voracious secretaries and servants, all of whom are enlivened by the despot's ever declining health. Apart from the egoistic entourage is Alberte, the illegitimate daughter of Klaes. She had been brought to the household when she was about ten years old. Prior to that time she had lived in Antwerp's most disreputable section, the Triangle, with her mother, Elsa Damiaen.
Alberte enjoys the luxurious living afforded her by her father, but is not interested in the huge inheritance to be left by him.

The basic plot concerns the waiting and machinations of Klaes' relatives who are eager for the old man to die so that they can inherit his fortune and Klaes's counterplotting to outmaneuver them. The legal heirs, suspecting that Klaes intends to disinherit everyone but Alberte, attempt to make the old man reject her by revealing to him her love affair with one of the secretaries, Yves Safari. This fails, however. The day arrives in which Alberte is to become the official heiress of her father's fortune. If she is to be the beneficiary, Klaes must first legitimize her. But Alberte refuses to sign the document which would make her his acknowledged daughter, thus rejecting the entire inheritance. The incredulous Klaes suffers a heart attack, living only long enough to name Philippe his sole heir. Alberte is scorned by her lover, Yves, when he learns that she has discarded the fortune. Dejected and disillusioned, she leaves the house to return to the Triangle.

The male protagonist of L'Empire céleste, Stéphane Morani, is a pianist whose professional achievements have been limited to the playing of afternoon music in a mediocre café. Stéphane has a small circle of admiring friends with whom he meets every Monday night to discuss poetry and art in the Empire céleste, an unsuccessful restaurant.
Since childhood Stéphane has kept his journal, or rather, the journal of the man he would like to be. In the journal Stéphane records a distorted view of his experiences and feelings in order that he can maintain the image he has created. This largely fictitious conception becomes reality in Stéphane's mind. Stéphane's existence is not an unpleasant one, but his happiness is only illusory.

The female protagonist, Martine Florin, becomes Stéphane's confidant. She is a very plain, even ugly, girl who is a clerk in a local store. Although she is aware of her unattractive appearance, she finds it to be no handicap in her relationship with Stéphane. Martine, however, is not content with the platonic love they have, hoping that Stéphane will divorce his ex-prostitute wife, Louise. Stéphane's high and noble ideals forbid such action.

In his journal, Stéphane has written extremely complimentary and beautiful passages concerning Martine. She, upon reading the journal, experiences an ambivalent emotion, a mixture of joy and disbelief because of the image she sees of herself. Martine decides to find out if Stéphane is really the man in the journal. She persuades him to read the journal to the Monday night gatherings but the reaction she expected does not take place. Martine's next move is to relate to Stéphane that his wife is having an affair.
with a famous artist, Henri Stass, who wants to marry her. Stéphane, who has always maintained that he married Louise to save her and that without him she would be completely alone and lost, is now forced, by the pressure brought to bear by his friends, to divorce her. He must leave her in order to uphold the image he has always professed. This action, which compels Stéphane to recognize that he is not the image he has created, results in the loss of his reason.

Martine, now freed of the blind admiration she had for Stéphane, is able to lead a normal life. Louise, confused by his action, goes to live with Henri. Life in the Empire céleste continues with no noticeable change.

Les Personnages, like the four previous novels of our author, presents the predicament of another lonely character, Louise de la Fayette. It surpasses the foregoing works, however, in its psychological complexity. The action in this novel is held to a minimum, taking second place to the emotional confusion experienced by its main characters.

The structural form of Les Personnages is complex in that the events leading to Louise's entrance into the convent are interposed among her meditations during her first night there. During these meditations which are spaced unevenly throughout the book, Louise reflects upon the transition that has occurred in her life and
speculates about the future. This structural deviation from the traditional form of the novel with its chronological development of plot, however, is of no particular significance in this study and will therefore not be mentioned again.

The plot concerns the intrigues of two factions of the court of Louis XIII. Caught between both factions is Louise de la Fayette, a lady in waiting to Queen Anne d'Autriche. Louise's main importance in the court, however, is being the favorite of the king. Although she wants no part in the intrigues of either faction, she is nonetheless suspected by both. Louise's relationship with the king is confined to the role of a trusted confidante and, contrary to the suspicion of the court, she is not his mistress. These two lonely individuals derive from each other's friendship a relief from their unhappy memories of their mutually unpleasant childhoods. Because the court's rival factions feel that Louise has a great influence on Louis, they do not want her to maintain the position she has. Each side suspects that she is secretly allied with the other. Cardinal Richelieu, chief conspirator of one faction, is convinced that Louise is a potential danger to his cause and decides that the only solution is that she leave the court. In order to achieve this objective, the Cardinal employs the services of a certain Abbé G who is placed in the court as the confessor of the unsuspecting Louise. The Abbé, a cynical opportunist,
is to persuade Louise that she has been chosen by God to take the veil and enter a convent. If he is successful, the Cardinal has promised him the Bishopric of Sens.

While Louise is aware of the court intrigues and knows that she is suspected by both sides, she believes that because she has no desire at all to influence the King in regard to political matters, she is protected. She finds that she is mistaken, however, as her manifestation of disinterest makes her all the more suspect. Both sides try to compromise her. This is impossible because Louise's interest and devotion are directed only toward Louis as a person and not toward affairs of state.

The Abbe' plays his role well as confessor to Louise. He convinces her that she has a religious vocation. Louise enters a convent and thus the Cardinal and his faction are satisfied. It would appear that Louise had been duped by the Abbe'. Yet during her five meditations, which provide the underlying theme of the book, Louise attains a truer understanding of herself. She accepts her destiny.
Chapter I

Cet appétit de vivre et de sentir

The first labyrinthian situation which will be analyzed is that of Hélène, the teen-age protagonist of *Le Rempart des Béguines*, and *La Chambre rouge*. The entangled emotional state in which Hélène found herself led her into one of the most sordid labyrinths that our author has created. It was one molded by the perversion of a thirty-five year old Lesbian, and nurtured by the naïveté and curiosity of a fifteen year old girl. In order to understand why Hélène became involved in this situation, and to understand the effect that it had on her life, it is necessary to study her background and the attitudes which she developed toward life as a result of this background.

Hélène's home life did not offer her the family love and parental understanding that an adolescent needs. Being an only child, and motherless since she was eight, she had never enjoyed the satisfaction of sharing her dreams and experiences with brothers and sisters, and had never known the comforting guidance, understanding and love of a mother. Her father, René Noris, since the death of his wife, had become so completely preoccupied with his business affairs that his attitude toward Hélène was seemingly one of indifference. He concerned himself with only two aspects of her life: her scholastic achievements at the school she attended and
her observance of the rules of conduct imposed by the upper-middle class society to which she belonged. Because of his attempt to maintain the social position they enjoyed, her father continually criticized Hélène for her apparent disregard of the social barriers between classes. His interest in her studies was superficial and was manifested only in corrective criticism.

Because of his unwillingness to spend more time with her than necessary, Hélène believed that her father considered her presence an annoyance. Unable to establish any bonds of mutual understanding with him, she felt unloved.

Thus deprived of a normal family life, Hélène was compelled to turn to other sources, attempting to fill the void wrought by this deprivation. She sought to find consolation from the maid who had been her only friend since the death of her mother. Such a relationship had been acceptable when Hélène was still quite young, but with her approaching maturity, rules of conduct became more exacting. The maid, too, was aware of the barriers imposed by society as can be seen in her attempt to explain why Hélène's presence in the kitchen was unwelcome: "Que voulez-vous, les maîtres sont les maîtres et les domestiques les domestiques, ma pauvre Hélène. C'est la société qui veut ça..."  

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Her immediate environment, then, offered Hélène nothing but loneliness and boredom. The house itself became for her a symbol of unhappiness and depression. It was a large old-style stone house which, because of its size, only added to Hélène's feeling of desolation: "Je voulais, pendant quelques secondes, m'enfuir, à tout prix, aller mendier sur les routes plutôt que de subir encore mon étouffante solitude."

There was nothing in the peaceful port city of Gers which could satisfy her hunger for excitement. The social milieu in which she lived was composed of typical bourgeois people who, like her father, were always trying to augment their wealth and prestige. Hélène, however, was not concerned with such matters and detested the festivities which comprised a major part of the social life of Gers. She abhorred the hypocrisy of the bourgeois people whose lives were guided by a desire for public approval and personal advancement. The arts, world affairs, and politics which they discussed held no genuine interest for them: they were merely attempting to create an aristocratic image.

The school she attended did not offer any escape from her boredom. She sought to find personal attention in classes by pretending ignorance and by disruptive conduct. Although she

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9 Le Rempart, p. 9.
strongly desired to have friends, the school did not afford her the understanding and companionship she sought. Her classmates were too typically bourgeois in their attitudes to appeal to Hélène.

Although she did attend church, she had no religious convictions. While in church she seldom prayed except for her own happiness, and sometimes for forgiveness for a sin which was to be quickly repeated:

A l'église... je m'étais réjouie parfois, tandis que j'écoutais les orgues, à regarder la mine recueillie de tous ces gens qui priaient, et à me dire que, moi seule peut-être, je ne priais pas. Je demandais vite pardon à la Vierge de ces mauvaises pensées, car j'avais une certaine foi craintive qui confinait à la superstition, mais l'instant d'après, ma prière de contrition achevée, je retombais dans mon péché...\(^\text{10}\)

Hélène, then, did not attend church for spiritual solace, nor did religious principals guide her life: "L'église tenait alors une grande place dans mes plaisirs d'imagination et fort peu dans mes préoccupations morales."\(^\text{11}\)

Hélène tried to escape from a reality which held nothing exciting, appealing, or satisfying for her. She allowed herself to become partially hypnotized by her imagination: at home, she would lean over an outside balcony, imagining herself falling through space; at school, she used to stare at objects until they became distorted and unreal to her; at church her imagination again gained control over her senses: "...à l'église, où j'allais le

\(^{10}\) *Le Rempart*, pp. 76-77.

\(^{11}\) *Le Rempart*, p. 62.
dimanche me perdre dans l'ivresse facile de l'orgue et de l'encens. The game of illusions that she played was her only source of diversion.

As a result of her lack of close relationships with other people and her disdain of a society which could offer her nothing of interest, Hélène became a very self-centered individual. Her desire for companionship combined with her need to find excitement and to experience new sensations proved strong enough to compel her to follow any course which might possibly effect a change in her condition. When she learned that her father had a mistress, Hélène's interest and imagination were quickly aroused:

...mon père avait fourni un nouvel aliment à mon imagination. Ce nom [Tamara] déjà était une promesse de dépaysement. Il me donna d'abord le fugitif et incompréhensible plaisir d'une bille froide qu'on roule dans la main, d'une fleur mouillée de pluie qu'on écrase tout à coup.12

When Hélène first arranged to meet Tamara, it was merely out of curiosity. Yet even this first meeting produced an enormous change in her:

Je me souviens de ma peur, Tamara. Je me souviendrai toujours de la peur que j'ai eue cette semaine-là, parce que c'était la première de cette espèce. Tout était devenu réel autour de moi, d'une réalité menaçante et concrète. Un

12 Le Rempart, p. 62.
13 Le Rempart, p. 11.
bouleversement s'était produit dans mon monde de petite fille, et le paysage en était transformé.14

Hélène became obsessed with the thought of Tamara who was different from the other people of Gers; she was not a pseudo-aristocrat who concerned herself with public opinion. Her bohemian manner of living fascinated Hélène. During their second meeting, Hélène became even more enchanted by her:

Je n'avais jamais eu d'amie, personne à qui je puisse dire mes répugnances et mes colères contre les gens de Gers, mes puérils désirs d'aventure, les rêves étranges que je faisais. Je pensais même que personne, à Gers, ne me comprendrait jamais.... Et tout à coup, je découvais quelqu'un qui s'intéressait à moi, qui partageait sûrement son mépris pour cette "société" dépourvue d'intérêt, que mon père ne m'empêcherait pas de voir et dont la vie me faisait rêver.15

Hélène was uneasy about her inexplicable attraction toward Tamara. Her feeling of empathy for Tamara and her desire for adventure were stronger than her disconcertion. When Tamara suggested that Hélène pay her a visit, she was powerless to resist:

'Oui', dis-je. J'aurais été bien incapable de dire autre chose. L'angoisse délicieuse me tenait aux genoux, au défaut de l'épaule, me faisait frissonner. Si j'avais eu à formuler mon sentiment, il ne me serait venu à la bouche que le mot 'terrible'. Une douceur terrible, c'est bien cela.16

Thus Hélène, emotionally confused and bewildered by this mysterious attraction, was drawn into the sordid and corrupt world of Tamara.

At the outset of her liaison with Tamara, Hélène was emotionally

15 Le Rempart, pp. 31-32.
16 Le Rempart, pp. 36-37.
and psychologically upset by the life in which she had become involved:

...je me trouvais la proie d'inquiétudes d'autant plus grandes qu'elles étaient vagues; le plaisir même que j'avais pris à ces caresses me semblait un indice de maladie, et sans oser en parler à Tamara, je m'inquiétais, je me questionnais, je m'affolais à plaisir sans savoir que faire.\(^1\)

The powerful and disciplined will of the older woman, however, was stronger and more forceful than that of the girl. Hélène quickly abandoned her fears and anxieties, becoming the total victim of Tamara's will. Hélène was no longer a free agent; she completely lost her independence. Her personality and thinking became near duplicates of Tamara's. She emulated her in every way, adopting her mannerisms, her values and her standards:

Je m'efforçais de l'imiter. Je prenais un ton bref, les gestes un peu garçonniers qu'elle avait parfois. J'affectais de mépriser (avec un léger sentiment de remords) toutes les conventions, et je faisais l'admiration de mes compagnes de cours par mes théories hardies. Mais devant Tamara elle-même, je me taissais prudemment. Son sourire ironique m'eût fait rentrer sous terre.\(^2\)

She learned to disdain feminine weakness and to hold in contempt the type of love which exists between man and woman. Hélène became the dedicated disciple of her demoralized god.

The ever-mounting demands of Tamara and Hélène's increasingly frequent acts of self-humiliation could not help but produce a

\(^1\)Le Rempart, p. 48.

\(^2\)Le Rempart, p. 55.
reaction in Hélène. Each humiliation left its residue of resentment, a residue which accumulated day by day as Hélène was forced to debase herself ever more completely by Tamara's depravity. Though she was for a long time unable to free herself from the need for Tamara, this accumulated resentment was to provide the necessary impulse toward freedom when the event occurred which enabled Hélène to regard Tamara in a new light.

This event was Tamara's announcement that she intended to marry Hélène's father. The girl now realized that Tamara was herself guilty of the feminine weakness she had previously scorned:

Je la regardai avec écoeurément. Sur ce visage que j'avais aimé, que j'avais admire si éperdument, qui avait été mon soleil, mon horizon, l'incarnation même de la beauté, de la cruauté, d'une volupte et d'une souffrance également délicieuses, venaient de se peindre cette humilité odieuse des mendiants et des femmes battues, cette lâcheté des êtres irresponsables, cette même faiblesse que j'avais haïe en moi, et qu'elle m'avait appris à haïr.¹⁹

Now Hélène, free from subservience and humiliation, felt that this experience, which was for the most part an ordeal, had contributed to her maturity:

...cet appetit de vivre et de sentir, voilà ce que Tamara m'avait donne en échange de mes rêves innombrables et touffus, de mon indifférence de plante.²⁰

She was able to regard herself and Tamara with a calm detachment

²⁰ Le Rempart, p. 87.
which had been impossible for her when she had been emotionally dependent upon Tamara. Their situation appeared to be reversed: "...j'avais pensé que Tamara et moi avions peut-être changé d'âme..." 21

Rima Drell Reck in an article on Françoise Mallet-Joris and her work expressed this reasonable viewpoint concerning the effect that this liaison had upon Hélène:

Hélène finds herself the matured disciple of a fallen god. While the young girl remains intact, proud, borne along on a "fresh and tonic hatred," (CB 17) her former lover Tamara has softened, prey to a feminine form of love which defiles and weakens her... As a test of self-discipline, to prove that she cannot be moved into a repulsive warmth and surrender of will, Hélène takes as a lover the would-be lover of Tamara. 22

In La Chambre rouge, Hélène discovers that this need to prove personal superiority leads her into a more self-destructive emotional entanglement. The labyrinth from which she thought she had freed herself had merely taken another turn. The emotional anguish she had suffered as a result of her disenchantment in Tamara had hardened her and made her cynical. She was no longer the young girl who wallowed in self-pity and who yearned for sympathetic understanding. During the two years which had elapsed since her Lesbian affair, her residue of resentment had crystallized into contempt. She had been

21 Le Rempart, p. 190.

forced to live with Tamara and her father and had watched with
disgust the new actions of her step-mother. There had been times
during these two years when Hélène had had to struggle to overcome
the temptation of accepting the new Tamara, but she had never
yielded:

...Est-ce que je me suis résignée, moi? Est-ce que depuis
deux ans j'ai faibli un seul moment? Un seul moment ai-je
cessé de la mépriser? Et pourtant la tentation était forte,
certains soirs de détresse, où la solitude autour de moi
m'enserrait comme une prison, où, seule dans ma chambre,
tout en haut de la maison, isolée du bruit, de la chaleur,
du facile plaisir que Tamara répandait autour d'elle, je
regardais par la fenêtre la ville entière descendant vers
le lac, et la noble courbe des collines.

Les larmes étaient proches, et proche l'oubli, le pardon

Hélène, at the age of eighteen, felt that she would never again
be victimized by emotional ties; the tenderness and love that she
had previously sought now seemed to her to be indications of weak­
ness and immaturity. She regarded herself as an invincible,
invulnerable woman.

Her attitude toward God had changed from one of indifference
to complete disavowal:

...ce Dieu pacifique qui supportait, qui accueillait Tamara
dans son église...le Dieu de cette femme, le Dieu de cette
ville n'était pas le mien. Si j'en avais eu un, il aurait
été bien plutôt le Jéhovah de l'Ancien Testament, le Dieu
impitoyable et jaloux qui dilate ses royales narines à l'odeur
des viandes grillées. Mon Dieu n'aurait pas de pardon.²⁴

In order to prove her invulnerability and also to eliminate the boredom which again surrounded her life, Hélène decided to take a lover. By seducing the would-be lover of Tamara, Jean Delfau (a young Parisian designer whose own labyrinthian situation will be the subject of the next chapter), she could enjoy the added pleasure of revenge:

Je rêvais à cette idée nouvelle qui avait surgi en moi: prendre Jean Delfau pour amant. J'y voyais un double avantage: celui de décevoir Tamara qui subirait les inconvénients de l'adultère sans en avoir les avantages...et je ne courais aucun risque de m'éprendre de lui. Car je ne voulais plus de tendresse en moi, plus d'attendrissement dangereux, plus de soumission avilissante. Je n'admettais plus que le désir, que je croyais seul sincère...²⁵

Thus with cold calculation Hélène set out to prove that she was above human weaknesses. Jean, who was equally bored and cynical, was amused by her determination to have an affair, and offered no resistance to being seduced. At the outset of the affair, Hélène was completely satisfied with her feelings of indifference toward Jean and of satisfaction at having thwarted Tamara. She was convinced that she was inexorable and superior:

La vanité des uns, la cupidité des autres...Jean et son talent sa célébrité, et cette Tamara confite dans l'hypocrisie, je me sentais sûre de pouvoir les conduire tous aux fins qu'il me plaisait. De tenir en main les fils qui manœuvraient ces

²⁴La Chambre rouge, p. 56.
²⁵La Chambre rouge, p. 22.
personnages dissemblables, j'en oubliais la solitude qui m'attendait chez moi....

Je retournais au doux mépris qui depuis deux ans me berçait des mêmes paroles: "Toi seule dure, toi seule neuve et intacte, toi seule forte et inattaquable....Personne ne pourrait plus m'atteindre."

Hélène had been deceived before by love and was certain that she would never again be duped by it. As the affair heightened in intensity, Hélène realized that the test which she had created for herself would be a greater challenge than she had anticipated. The intrigue that she had planned so coldly and which she had expected to be without emotional consequence, had become more than a simple liaison. Her feelings for Jean became ambivalent. She was bewildered by the fact that this affair, which was to be void of everything that gave love its worth and significance, had suddenly become a threatening force against the emotional barriers whose very foundation had been laid by hurt and disillusionment in love. Although she felt her defenses weakening, she would not retreat. To do so would have been to admit defeat. She reacted indifferently toward Jean's pretense of tenderness; she refused to yield to the inquietudes which she knew to be the indications of love. Her protective armor was softening, and Jean was responsible. In order to restore her own self-image of being inexorable, she resolutely set out to find

\[26 \text{La Chambre rouge, p. 26.}\]
Jean's point of vulnerability:

Jean n'était pas invulnérable, je l'aurais juré. Pour l'atteindre, il me suffirait de le comprendre. Pour le comprendre, il fallait le cerner. Une fièvre, la seule peut-être qui ne me vint pas de Tamara, une fièvre de combat me poussait. Si j'arrivais à triompher de cet homme adroit, rusé, intelligent, je serais délivrée enfin des doutes qui me restaient, je saurais que toute faiblessé était bannie, et que je ne dépendrais plus à l'avenir que de moi-même. Je serais seule enfin.

By talking to a former paramour of Jean, Hélène discovered many of the reasons that accounted for Jean's cynical attitude and also many of the secret complications that surrounded his life. Having discovered the pregnable point in Jean's defenses, she felt a certain amount of pity for him, but refused to be victimized by it. In order never to be caught in another web spun by love, she deliberately became involved in a second affair, this time with one of her school companions, Stani Mierowicz. Her love for Jean, however, increased as she continued her affair with Stani. Jean sought to confide in her, but his attempts were met with silence. She refused to show any understanding and sympathy. She thought that by responding she would once again become vulnerable to something false. She suspected that Jean's need for understanding and love was not genuine but only a front designed to conquer rather than earn her love. Jean's love for her was killed when he learned of her affair.

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27??la Chambre rouge, p. 106.
with Stani. Hélène deliberately stifled her love for Jean because she was afraid to accept it:

Il me détestait, je le sentis tout de suite à la façon dont il me prit dans ses bras. Il me haïssait de l'avoir un moment compris, d'avoir, surpris ses secrets, d'avoir deviné sa faiblesse. Je le haïssais de m'avoir révélé l'amour le plus difficile, et de ne pas m'avoir empêchée de tuer cet amour. 28

Hélène finds that her self-interest and her pursuit of what she had deemed desirable have resulted in self-deceit. She attains her goals of independence and freedom from love and learns that, while achieving this, she has lost something she can never again attain:

Nous ne devions pas nous revoir. Jamais il ne pourrait me pardonner de l'avoir vu désarmé, jamais je ne pourrais oublier que j'avais eu peur de l'aimer; jamais nous ne nous pardonnerions la beauté de ce qui aurait pu être.... Et aujourd'hui j'étais les mains vides, consciente à peine de la valeur de ce que j'avais perdu, et sentant tout de même que la perte la plus grave, que la châtiment véritable n'était pas tant d'avoir perdu l'amour de Jean que d'avoir, à force de blasphème, étouffé savamment le mien. 29

Yet Hélène's emotions were not entirely those of regret:


Hélène has freed herself from the labyrinth but that which she lost while she was wandering through it can never be replaced. She

28La Chambre rouge, p. 275.
29La Chambre rouge, pp. 281-283.
30La Chambre rouge, pp. 282-283.
realizes too late that her desires for superiority and self-assertion have been attained through self-deceit. Paradoxically, the love which she had struggled against for so long, and managed to overcome, now seems to her to be the most desirable possession of all.
Chapter II

Une amertume

Hélène was not the only person lost in the labyrinth created by Mme. Mallet-Joris in her two first novels. Jean Delfau, like Hélène, was wandering in a labyrinth as a result of his own flight from reality into self-illusion and deceit. While the tragic sense of loss experienced by both Jean and Hélène at the end of their affair permitted Hélène to extricate herself from the maze, the frustrated love affair caused Jean to continue meandering along another path. Pride and bitterness prevented him from finding the exit. Exaggerating the importance of self-sufficiency, Jean felt that only by leaving Hélène could he maintain any semblance of personal freedom: he had lost the last vestige of control over the course of their affair. Remaining completely free was important to Jean because of the many years of nursing wounds which were inflicted when he was a boy.

Jean's childhood is analogous to that of Hélène in some respects. He, too, was left motherless when he was eight years old, and he was an only child. After the death of his mother, Jean's only companion until he was twelve was his nurse. His father, a wealthy merchant, was too absorbed in his endeavors to augment his fortune to allow a
usual father-son relationship to exist. Thus, Jean grew up without the advantages of a normal family life. At this point, however, the analogy ends. Aside from these basic similarities in their backgrounds diverse elements are found which, in part, account for their different reactions when confronted with the conclusion of their affair.

In contrast with the rejection that Hélène suffered as a child was the stifling parental concern that Jean experienced. After an early childhood accident paralyzed one of his arms, he was made to feel that he was different from others: he was forbidden to keep company with other children. His father, thinking that he was saving Jean from the ridicule of unkind children, was in reality developing in him a sense of inferiority. He had been unduly shielded at the time of his mother's death, being told that she had merely gone away. He had been very close to his mother and it was thought that learning the truth would be more than he could endure:

Je l'avais vu ramener, pâle comme une morte, peut-être morte déjà. Le soir de ce jour, on vint m'annoncer—c'était, je m'en souviens, une petite bonne de quinze ans, mon père n'ayant pas voulu me montrer son visage ravagé par les larmes—que ma mère était partie pour un très long voyage. Et moi, qui soupçonnais déjà la vérité, je m'écriai que ce n'était pas vrai, que je voulais savoir. Mais quand je vis sur le visage de la fille, qui ne savait pas dissimuler, et dans ses yeux rougis que la terrible vérité approchait, allait être 'dite', je me jetai en criant sur elle, en hurlant: 'Ne dites rien! Je le crois!'31

31La Chambre rouge, pp. 199-200.
It was not until he was thirteen that Jean learned the truth which he had always suspected but would never admit to himself.

He was not only protected from the harsh realities of life but also from the world of fantasy. His grandmother, who had been his closest companion until he was six, attempted to encourage him to enjoy the world of make-believe common to early childhood. His parents, however, cruelly criticized their innocent pursuit of fantasy; his grandmother was told to stop encouraging him in these absurdities.

When he was twelve, his father, still wanting to protect him and prepare him for the inevitable difficulties of life, became his sole companion and remained so for the next few years. Jean accepted the idea that human contacts would only cause him to suffer. In the following passage Hélène sums up in her own mind the profound influence that Jean's father had on him:

Ainsi lui communiquait-il son expérience qui était celle d'un homme sensible et souvent blessé, d'un homme conscient de son origine et de sa richesse, non pas certes comme d'une tare, mais comme d'un état qui le mettait à part du commun des hommes, et qui en écartait à plus forte raison son fils infirme. Je crus sentir que cet homme bon, assez sceptique, et qui sa fortune faite, ne voyait plus le sens de cet immense effort, avait eu sur son fils une énorme influence. Jean écoutait, recevait toutes les blessures de son père, et s'en guérissait avec lui. Ainsi apprenait-il à ne pas faire à la vie un crédit que pour lui elle eût peut-être mérité. \[32\]

Thus Jean's attitude toward life in general was strongly influenced by his father. His desire for self-assertion resulted from the way in which people reacted toward him because of his infirmity. It was insinuated that Jean could never earn his own living and, because of his father's wealth, it was assumed that he would never have to do so. Resenting this general opinion, Jean determined that he would never touch his father's fortune:

C'est même un reproche qu'on m'a fait toute ma vie, dit Jean non sans une certaine amertume. Mon père a cru m'assurer une vie idéale, débarrassée de tous soucis, et il ne m'a légué en fait qu'un assez lourd fardeau, que je n'ai même pas la satisfaction d'avoir désiré un seul jour. Figure-toi... que je m'étais juré, quand j'avais vingt ans, de ne jamais toucher à cette fortune et de gagner moi-même de quoi vivre largement.33

Self-interest, then, plays a major part in causing Jean to stumble into the maze from which he could not escape.

Jean's love of the theatre started when he was a boy. When he was bored his father would send him to the opera with his nurse. His disability smothered his hope of becoming an actor, so he turned to designing. He worked hard to be a success in this field both financially and professionally. The prestige he enjoyed as a designer and the wealth he had gained were the harvest of the seeds of determination planted by hurt and bitterness when he was a boy. His drive to attain complete self-possession made him totally

33La Chambre rouge, p. 203.
indifferent to emotion. When Hélène first met him she found him to be, at the age of thirty-two, a conceited and cynical Don Juan. He had made a very favorable impression on the feminine portion of Gers' middle-class society and was enjoying all of the attention they paid him while inwardly deriding his flatterers. When he realized that Hélène was attempting to seduce him, he was amused. She was obviously not interested in his wealth and was definitely not seeking affection; she was merely determined to have an affair. Jean offered no resistance to the liaison because he, too, felt that he would never be victimized by affection and sentimentality. He had had several affairs prior to meeting Hélène, but had never felt emotionally attached to any of his mistresses. He was extremely content with the type of life he was leading which gave him few complications, yet still felt unjustly treated by those who were jealous of his talent and success. This caused him to become even more embittered.

As their affair continued, Hélène, as we have seen, felt herself becoming too fond of Jean to sustain her determination for emotional freedom. Jean, too, felt himself becoming more attached to Hélène than he had intended. He began to reveal to her his past fears and hurts, and his aspirations. When Hélène entered a concurrent liaison, Jean realized that he had been her victim. Incapable of the love it would have taken to forgive her because he could not
conquer his own pride, Jean left her. He realized that Hélène had discovered his weak points and had capitalized upon them in order to surmount her own susceptibility to love. Both of them, for fear of being scorned by the other, refused to love, indeed made themselves incapable of it through self-interest and pride.

Whereas Hélène did emerge from the maze, Jean could not. He had not consistently maintained the goals dictated by self-interest and had weakened only to come to the bitter realization that he had been used by Hélène. He could not accept this fact, overcome it, and find happiness by causing Hélène's affection for him to develop into love. Now, unlike Hélène, who resigned herself to the fact that they had destroyed the relationship that could have existed and who realized that self-interest and pride were responsible for the loss, Jean merely sought oblivion. He was not able to accept his hurt and, therefore, endeavored not to allow Hélène to recognize his resentment. She, however, perceived his true attitude:

Il lui suffisait de résister, de se fâcher, de partir. Mais je savais bien qu'il ne le pouvait plus: il avait dépassé déjà le point où il pouvait lui-même reconnaître sa blessure. Il ne cherchait plus que l'oubli...

Jean left Hélène and turned into another path in the maze. He was not capable of freeing himself. His bitterness had become so all-pervading that he would never again allow himself to become a victim of affection and tenderness.

34 *La Chambre rouge*, p. 279.
Chapter III

La douleuse incertitude

Les Mensonges presents another aspect of the labyrinthian world created by Mme. Mallet-Joris. The circumstances which guided the two main characters of this novel into a maze differ considerably from those in the first two novels, yet there are still the elements of deceit and illusion which are common to all of the works.

The path of twenty year-old Alberte in the maze has been a circular one. Unlike all of the other characters lost in a labyrinth, Alberte returned to the exact situation from which she thought she had escaped forever. She, too, was a victim of deceit and dupery, but not of her own doing as was the case with the two previous characters studied. Alberte's childhood, social milieu, and parental relationships were unique when compared to the rest. But even such diverse circumstances did not prevent Alberte from being entrapped in a web of deceit and duplicity woven by those around her.

Alberte's childhood situation was the most pitiful and tragic of all those characters created by the author. She was the natural daughter of Klaes van Baarnheim, a wealthy brewmaster of Antwerp. The early years of her life were spent with her mother, Elsa Damiaen, in the Triangle, the most despicable section
of the port city of Antwerp. During the fifteen years that Alberte lived there, she had been subjected to poverty, social prejudice, and hard work. Far from being a comfort to her by providing her with love and moral standards, her mother was an antagonist, serving only to aggravate the psychological pain that Alberte suffered as a result of her illegitimate birth. Elsa played the role of a martyr, continually impressing upon Alberte that through motherly love and devotion she had willingly sacrificed the high position in life to which she thought she was entitled.

As a young woman, Elsa had left her uncle's unsuccessful farm in pursuit of wealth and social prominence. She felt that she was not meant for farm life, that she was destined for something far greater. Her uncle compounded her desire for success by ridiculing her lack of good sense. The type of life and excitement she found in Antwerp, however, proved to be a disappointment to her dreams. Disillusioned but still hopeful, she moved to the Triangle. There she met Klaes van Baarnheim, the rich and socially prominent brewmaster. Believing that at last she had found her "raison d'être", she entered a liaison with Klaes. Elsa again was disenchanted, however, because Klaes left her a few weeks later. With Alberte as a constant reminder of this affair, Elsa has never been able to forget her disappointment. In an effort to pose as a victim of fate, she made preposterous claims concerning the life that could have been hers. These fabrications, deriving from despair, were augmented by her
excessive drinking which was in large part paid for by a monthly check from Klaes. Elsa then, like her daughter, became an object of ridicule in the Triangle.

Weary of her complex existence with its entourage of prostitutes and derelicts, the ravings of her mother, and the mockery from which she could not escape, Alberte yearned for the simplicity of life which she felt was guaranteed by the possession of material comfort:

Aussi, le jour où on lui avait annoncé qu'elle vivrait dorénavant chez son père, le riche brasseur van Baarnheim, dont on apercevait le jardin de l'autre côté du fleuve, avait-elle connu un immense soulagement. Et ce n'était jamais sans déplaisir qu'elle revenait voir sa mère.  

While preparing to move to Klaes' home, Alberte was forced to listen to the tearful lamentations of her mother and three of her mother's debauched companions, who accused her of lack of gratitude for the years of care and shelter with which her mother had provided her. Alberte did not answer them:

...partie déjà dans cet avenir qu'on lui promettait, enfin libérée de ce passé, Elsa, sa sensibilité étaillée, sa dureté secrète, les clients familiers, les rires, les lentes heures vautrées dans ce désordre qu'elle détestait par-dessus tout, qu'elle rencontrait partout, et qui lui gagnait jusqu'à l'âme.  

Alberte's quest for simplicity and comfort differed greatly from Hélène's search. While Hélène actively sought to attain her goals through associating first with Tamara, and then with Jean,

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Alberte's behavior was quiet and reserved. She gave the appearance of being shy and timid, and was never forceful in her actions. Alberte wanted so much to be accepted that she strove constantly to please the entire van Baarnheim household. She was circumspect in her actions in order not to upset her ailing father. She was afraid that because of some awkwardness she would be forced to leave his home and return to the Triangle. Her uncle, Philippe Brenner, Klaes' business manager, observed Alberte as she struggled to adapt to the household routine:

Il y avait en elle quelque chose de contraint qui l'attirait. Peu intelligente, elle s'efforçait si visiblem ent de ne commettre aucun impair, d'adopter une attitude qu'elle devait juger pleine de dignité, en accord avec la maison qu'elle admirait... Et en même temps, de temps en temps, un geste, un regard, trahissait en elle cette santé, cette avidité qui devait lui venir de son père, une sensualité violente dont sans doute elle n'avait pas conscience... 37

Alberte, however, wanted nothing more than to be permitted to live in Klaes' large home.

At this point it is necessary to describe Alberte's environment. Klaes, who will be discussed at length in the following chapter, was ill and becoming continually weaker. His home was occupied by relatives and servants who were eagerly awaiting his death. Each was completely self-centered; a situation which again exemplifies the typical motivation of all of our author's characters. Their

primary interest was the satisfaction of their own desires with very little consideration being given to others. Even Alberte, although she was not avaricious like her relatives, was still most interested in her own welfare. Klaes' other nephew, Roger Nuñez, was his doctor. Roger had never revealed to Klaes the seriousness of his condition. There was a possibility that, if Klaes suspected his true condition, he would change doctors and disinherit Roger. All members of the household—his sister, Mme. Nuñez, the chauffeur, and the other servants—humored Klaes and were terrified by him. The entire household was fraudulent, for each person was wearing a mask in order to impress Klaes with his concern and affection. The maid, too, was anticipating her share of Klaes' wealth. She casually gave herself to him whenever he desired her in an attempt to gain a part of the fortune. Klaes, however, was not deceived by their behavior. He rather enjoyed the power he held over them. Only Alberte was not interested in the inheritance. Aware of this, Klaes respected her for it. Like the others, Alberte consistently attempted to please him, but her motivation differed as it was based on the fear that she would be torn from her comfortable surroundings.

Alberte found it an effort to act as she did. She was plagued by the fear of being awkward and of making a mistake. She also felt a certain resentment toward her uncle Philippe because of the condescending manner in which he treated her.
Klaes became obsessed with a desire that Elsa, Alberte's mother, should leave town. He had been told that people were beginning to ridicule him because of Elsa's maudlin comments. Alberte complied with her father's wishes concerning her mother: she attempted to make Elsa accept the money that Klaes offered as an inducement to leave town. She told her mother that, as Klaes had promised her a large endowment when she reached the age of twenty-five, she would be able to help her mother enjoy a more comfortable life. Elsa, however, refused to accept. In her half-crazed state, she believed herself to be above such a recourse. Elsa also did not want to lose the audience which she could bribe to listen to her claims to respectability by the liberal use of Klaes' monthly allowance. Klaes then, with Alberte's aid, had Elsa committed to a hospital.

During the six years previous to this event, Klaes had largely ignored his daughter. Now he began to pay more attention to her by taking her to restaurants, to the opera, and by buying her expensive presents. On their first evening out together, Alberte felt that she had achieved her goal of security:

_Elle allait enfin avoir avec son père l'une de ces conversations comme elle rêvait depuis si longtemps d'en avoir. Il verrait enfin qui elle était; qu'elle savait se tenir, parler..._Eût-on devine jamais, à la voir, qu'elle était une fille du Triangle?_38_

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_38_ _Les Mensonges_, p. 199.
The family's hostility toward Alberte became more pronounced.
Klaes' sudden interest in Alberte after so long a time was seen as a serious threat to their chances of inheriting his fortune.

Alberte's uncle, Philippe, was especially distrustful. He felt that her simple, frank manner was only a clever cover—that she was pretending an innocence she did not possess in order to inherit her father's fortune. Her diffident actions, then, which were really a result of her fear, were regarded as a means of deceiving her father and of defrauding the members of the family of a share of the wealth. In addition to his distrust, however, Philippe was attracted to her because of his feeling that she possessed a restrained vigor belied by her generally timid mannerisms. Klaes' sister, Mme. Nuñez, had opposed from the outset the idea that his natural daughter should live with them. Alberte's presence in such a prominent family was looked upon as a disgrace.

The family found that their worst fears had been justified. Partly to torment his relatives and partly to enjoy doing something for Alberte, Klaes gave her a big birthday party at which he presented her with a very expensive string of pearls. This was soon followed by a pledge of further gifts:

Je t'ai dit que je ferais pour toi plus que je n'ai promis: c'est vrai. Je ne t'ai pas flouée. Tu auras ta part, et une part assez belle pour les faire enrager tous. Nous irons à la banque: je te ferai ouvrir un compte. Tu feras ce que tu voudras, plus de travail, ta tante n'aura plus rien à te dire. Tu me tiendras compagnie: ce ne sera
Alberte was not completely happy with this new display of attention. She sensed that Klaes was seeking to dominate her completely, that he was attempting to eradicate her reserve.

Searching for companionship and friendship, Alberte became a close friend of her father's secretary, Yves Safari. With Yves she found the contentment she desired. He appeared to depend on her. The feeling of being needed was a new experience for her. They became lovers and although they endeavored to keep their relationship a secret, the many people of the household made it inevitable that they would be discovered.

Philippe was the first to learn about them. He immediately saw that this discovery could be used as a way to remove Alberte as a threat to the family's inheritance. She was closely watched and one night Klaes was called to Alberte's room by his sister with the fake claim that she had seen a burglar. Klaes saw Alberte and Yves together and, enraged, suffered a stroke.

When he recovered consciousness, Klaes saw by the countenance of the specialist who had been called in that he was going to die. He was incensed by the knowledge that he had been deceived for two years concerning the nature of his illness. He called for Alberte and when she faced him in her oldest clothes as though expecting to be thrown into the street, he was slightly

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mollified. Besides, he secretly admired her management of a concealed affair: he had done much the same thing several times himself. He decided to make his will and called for a notary. Addressing Alberte, he said:

Tu garderas les domestiques. Dolls s'occuperà très bien des agrandissements à faire, c'est un honnête homme. Il faudra garder Philippe; tu ne t'en tireras pas sans lui. Mais surveille-le.

When the notary arrived, he produced the necessary papers in order that Klaes might recognize her as his legitimate daughter and name her his heiress. Alberte, however, was stunned by the course of events:

Tout le monde avait l'air content, pensait Alberte. Son père, le notaire... et Philippe même, qui aurait dû être furieux, avait eu pour elle ce petit sourire malicieux... Elle se sentait atrocement oppressée, comme prise dans un étau. Elle n'en sortirait plus, maintenant, elle le savait. Elle n'était pas malade: c'était bien autre chose. Elle était prise dans un piège, dans lequel ils l'avaient tous attirée. Ils lui avaient fait croire que tout était simple, facile, et ce n'était pas vrai. Il lui avaient fait croire que sa mère guérirait, et il lui semblait que sa mère était morte. Et maintenant ils lui disaient qu'elle épouserait Yves, et cela aussi, elle en était sûre, s'en irait en poussière dans ses mains. Elle en était revenue à la douloureuse incertitude qui l'étignait autrefois dans le Triangle: 'Ce n'est pas cela, ce n'est pas cela...' D'un côté il y avait le Triangle, les rires odieux, le hideux désordre, la folie et les mensonges de sa mère, et de l'autre cette pesanteur qu'elle avait pu, un moment, prendre pour la sécurité, et qui s'abattait tout d'un coup sur ses épaules... Ils triomphaient d'elle, tous ensemble: le patron des Trois-Cigognes qui ne la trouvait pas gentille.

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*Les Mensonges*, p. 320.
Alberte destroyed the papers and fled from the room as her father, overcome by emotion at this rejection, suffered another stroke. Her rejection of this inheritance was rooted deeply in certain reservations she had felt since coming to the big house. Life here was not really as simple or as pleasing as she had imagined; life here was much more like life in the Triangle than she had thought possible:

...elle souffrait quelquefois, d'une façon confuse, de cette reconnaissance qu'il lui fallait produire sur commande, comme on fait produire à une personne peu sûre un dépôt précieux. Et cette petite susceptibilité humble et morose, qui était en elle, souffrait aussi quelquefois: les rires du Triangle s'étaient mues en sourires ironiques, en phrases qu'elle ne comprenait pas, en chuchotements...

At another time, Alberte had again reflected on this inability to find the true peace she desired so much:

...et plus que jamais, la désespérante complication des choses... Se pouvait-il qu'elle ne trouvât la paix ni au Triangle, ni dans la maison de son père? Pour elle, depuis toujours, n'existait que ces deux extrêmes...

After fleeing from her father's room, Alberte hurried to see her lover, Yves. When she explained to him that she had refused the fortune he became furious, incredulous that she could have denied them the money which would have enabled them

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41 Les Mensonges, p. 325.
43 Les Mensonges, p. 287.
to be married. Alberte tried to explain her sudden terror in that room of death:

La peur, devant cette âme qui voulait prendre, prendre toujours, alors qu'elle se faisait chaque jour un peu plus prisonnière... Son recul instinctif devant l'offre que ressemblait à un piège... Elle avait voulu fuir, c'était tout. Elle avait eu peur. Etait-il incapable de comprendre?

Embittered by her refusal of the estate, Yves bitterly rejects Alberte. Now she is once again completely alone, still seeking her way through her personal labyrinth as she strives for peace and tranquility, for a life free of complications. She thought for some years that she might attain her goal if she were careful to make few demands, but the people of her household had consistently misinterpreted her desires and her actions, hating her because of the threat they sensed she posed to their personal goals. The most ironical occurrence was that the man she depended on to achieve her ideal of comfort and peace, tried to impose the greatest burden of all—the tremendous responsibility of caring for and administering the estate. When she again flees from this burden as she had fled from the Triangle, she finds her lover, the one person who could comfort her, spurning her, leaving her completely alone without even the hopes that had accompanied her until now.

44Les Mensonges, p. 346.
Alberte leaves the house. Her uncle Philippe watches as she makes her way down the street which she first came up almost seven years before:

Il fallait la voir disparaître, n'emportant dans les mains que cette victoire dérisoire, que son dépouillement inutile. Inutile? Malgré le froid, il restait immobile, s'accrochant du regard à la tache brune que faisait son châle, au coin de la rue. Puis elle parut se décider, s'enfoncer courageusement, entre les maisons aveugles, dans l'obscurité. Elle tourna le coin de la rue, disparut.

45 Les Mensonges, p. 350.
Chapter IV

La soif de possession

The story of Klaes van Baarmheim, already mentioned as the father of Alberte, offers a fourth aspect of the labyrinthian world of Mme. Mallet-Joris unique from all the others yet basically similar to each. Like Jean and Hélène, Klaes also desired complete independence. He had achieved and maintained his goal and found his major enjoyment in dominating and arranging the lives of others, the needy petitioners for his aid as well as the members of his own family. Only death was a fitting adversary for Klaes—he dominated his financial and social environment. From the time he was a young boy until he was lying on his deathbed, he had been concerned only with the attainment of all his desires, particularly wealth and power.

Klaes' childhood had been marked by poverty and hypocrisy. His parents, once the wealthy owners of a drapery shop, were financially ruined but still maintained a pretense of being wealthy. Klaes neither loved nor understood them. He, unlike the majority of the main characters of our author, was not an only child. His parents displayed more affection toward his two sisters than toward him. As a result, Klaes felt unloved.

The house in which the van Baarnheim family lived was located in one of the best sections of Antwerp. Outwardly it
gave the impression of wealth and luxury. Inside, however, it was almost barren of comfort, containing only the essential furnishings.

Klaes repeatedly questioned his parents concerning their reasons for living there when they were obviously too poor to do so. He also sought explanations regarding their attendance at the most aristocratic church in town even though they were unable to afford a carriage and had to walk. The explanations he received from his parents, however, were never satisfying. From a financial point of view they should have been living in the Triangle, but they, the van Baarnheims, were too proud to admit it.

They resented their son's questioning because it was a constant reminder of their lost wealth and prestige. Klaes felt this resentment and alienation. "C'étaient au fond de petites gens, auxquels le manque de santé tenait lieu de vertu." They were hypocrites and Klaes openly expressed this opinion when he was twelve years old.

Klaes thought that his parents would accept him if he were able to contribute to the recovery of the family wealth. His initial financial success, however, only heightened their antagonism toward him. The attitude of his parents can be seen in the

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46 Les Mensonges, p. 84.
following passage:

Ils eussent préféré le voir vegeter petitement, comme eux, vaguement envieux, humbles et orgueilleux, ne s'accordant aucun confort, mais faisant d'ostentatoires aumônes, et tout de même, d'une certain façon, sincères et vrais dans leur rigorisme. Ils n'avaient jamais rien voulu accepter de Klaes; qu'il réussît les choquait déjà: ils s'étaient tant répété que c'était par honnêteté qu'ils n'avaient pas d'argent, qu'ils s'étaient persuadés finalement qu'on n'en pouvait avoir sans certaines compromissions plus ou moins louches. Ainsi ennoblissaient-ils leurs échecs.

Klaes scorned his parents, his parents' poverty and hypocrisy and struggled to obtain that wealth which they had been unable to retain or regain. Seeking acceptance and wealth, he developed a taste for luxury and power.

By the time Klaes had reached the age of thirty, he had already amassed a huge fortune. He had reestablished his parents' drapery shop, but they refused to recognize his success:

...au moment où il projetait de rendre tout son faste à la maison van Baarnheim, et de replacer la famille au rang qu'elle méritait, ses parents le quittaient, comme pour lui donner tort!46

Klaes was embittered by their reaction, but was undaunted in his drive for more wealth and more power. The taste for wealth and luxury that he had acquired as a child continued to stimulate his lust for success.

47 Les Mensonges, p. 84.
48 Les Mensonges, pp. 85-86.
After he had accumulated a fortune, his sister and his nephews joined him in the family home. He ran their lives, taking pleasure in dominating them. His sister, Odelia Núñez, was the unofficial overseer of the domestic servants. Like Klaes, she enjoyed a feeling of power, but she was at the mercy of his will, as were the others:

Il eût été jusqu'à ne pas s'irriter de leurs vices, s'ils lui en avaient confié, tant la soif de possession, de quelque espèce que ce fût, était profonde en lui. On comprendra aisément que parvenu à ce point, la moindre résistance fût pour lui plus qu'un obstacle: une contrevérité. 49

Each was waiting for Klaes to die so they could inherit his estate. Klaes was fully aware of their attitudes, and was amused by their displays of feigned concern for his welfare.

It was with diabolical pleasure that Klaes provided for the needs of his family and for those who sought his aid. In the following quote Philippe described the step-by-step process through which his uncle went from the beginning of his assistance to a petitioner to the latter's expulsion from the tyrannical benevolence of Klaes:

...contentement de soi (il aide un malheureux, premier stade); intérêt romanesque (ce malheureux lui raconte sa vie); sensation d'avoir fait une bonne affaire (il achète une âme comme une paire de draps, car le malheureux qui se noie considère la bouée comme une divinité); plaisir de la découverte (un ingrat!), du mépris (tous les hommes sont semblables), de

49Les Mensonges, p. 125.
Klaes demanded absolute submission and effusive gratitude from those whom he aided. As soon as they had demonstrated their complete dependence and appreciation for his assistance, they ceased to be of interest to him and consequently were denied his support.

Klaes met every obstacle to his will with stubborn resolve. When Elsa, Alberte's mother, refused his offer of a large sum of money as an inducement to leave Antwerp, he was confused but undeterred in his determination to satisfy his obsession to have her removed as an annoyance. With Alberte's assistance, he had Elsa committed finally to a mental institution. Again his will had triumphed.

Even as an old man of seventy, Klaes continued to take pleasure in disturbing the heirs of his estate. The main reason that Alberte had come to live with them in the first place was that Klaes knew such a move would upset his family. He was very attentive to Alberte because he saw that it disgusted and disrupted his entire household. They were all at his mercy and could show no real opposition to his authority because to do so would have

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50 Les Mensonges, p. 21.
been to place themselves in jeopardy of being disinherited.

Unlike the other major characters of Mme. Mallet-Joris, Klaes never deviated from his convictions. From beginning to end, he did not change, but remained true to his original ideas. In spite of this lack of the self-doubt and uncertainty common to the other characters enmeshed in the labyrinth, Klaes was also in the maze. He would not tolerate opposition to his will, and was powerful enough always to conquer. But his conquests were often more apparent than real. He could dominate others physically and economically by the force of his will and he could sense and enjoy their resentment toward him but he could never know the full extent of their actions to circumvent and frustrate his will and desires:

*S'il y a une chose que Klaes ne peut pas supporter, c'est l'idée que les gens ont un petit domaine à eux dont il ne peut pas s'emparer. Même si ce petit domaine n'est rien d'autre qu'une bouteille de rouge.*

Alberte, for example, had a liaison with Yves that she knew her father would not condone; the entire family deceived him in regard to his health; his sister, Mme. Núñez, maliciously suggested to him that Elsa was making him the laughing stock of Antwerp. So Klaes did not conquer others as completely as he believed; in fact, he was, ironically, manipulated by them.

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51 *Les Mensonges*, p. 158.
But Klaes' true opponent, an opponent which he could not conquer, was his health. He was ill for the last two years of his life and though he did not know the true nature of his illness, he suffered long periods of intense pain. This pain seemed most overpowering when he was alone at night and the house was silent. It seemed to swell and spread throughout his body and all of his mental powers would be concentrated on the struggle against his implacable opponent. At such times he longed for noise and company to distract him. He would wait anxiously for the town clocks to strike the hour and at dawn would punch feverishly at bells by his bed which would ring throughout the household. The building would come to life as everyone responded once more to Klaes' desires and needs.

Until his last moments, Klaes had succeeded in satisfying his ambitions. Self-interest had provided him with an enjoyable life, yet the end product of his labors, the disposition of the estate he had amassed through the years, brought bitterness. On his deathbed, Klaes attempted to make Alberte his sole heiress by first legitimizing her. At her refusal, he was bewildered and unbelieving, but he refused to beg. The following quote shows his attitude, the product of seventy years of development:

Je n'ai jamais rien demandé à personne, disait Klaes. Jamais. Et ce n'est pas aujourd'hui que je commencerai... Je n'ai pas peur. Rien demandé à personne.\(^2\)

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Ironically, the one person he counted on most, Alberte, denied his final wishes, his final attempt at manipulating and controlling the lives and fortunes of others. He suffered rejection in the most positive and irrevocable manner imaginable. Self-interest had once again been accompanied by its partner, self-deception.

Klaes escaped from his segment of the labyrinth through death. Had he not died, he probably would not have been able to tolerate this opposition to his will and would have been unable to accept the fact that money and power could not arrange everything. Money had not been able to buy him health nor had power been able to arrange the disposition of his estate to his satisfaction.
Chapter V

Le mensonge s'installa peu à peu

The next character we shall consider, Stéphane Morani of L'Empire céleste, is the weakest of Mme. Mallet-Joris' major characters. It would be difficult to imagine a character more unlike Klaes. Whereas Klaes was strong and unrelenting in his convictions about life, Stéphane was insecure and pliable. During the course of events depicted in their respective settings, Klaes was old, single, wealthy, forceful, unconcerned about the opinions of others, and was the primum mobile of all around him; Stéphane was young, married, poor, weak, and responsive to the desires and opinions of his peers. While at the end of his labyrinthian existence Klaes died shouting defiance, Stéphane suffered quite a different fate. Klaes, as well as each major character of our author, believed that he had been duped during childhood by his parents and others, but Stéphane thought that he had been deceived by God as well. Once again the anguished labyrinthian existence of a lonely individual was strongly conditioned by a distorted childhood.

Stéphane grew up in the provincial town of Signac. He lived with his parents and his grandfather in an unpretentious house. His father was a teacher of English. Although they were content with their station and accepted their middle-class position, they
lived in the reflected glory of the prestige that Mme. Morani's parents had once had. Stéphane's maternal grandfather, who lived with them, was a constant reminder of the position that once was his. Stéphane's family paid a great deal of attention to the opinions of other people, always striving to do only those things which would be acceptable in the eyes of others. Although both of his parents boasted of Mme. Morani's ancestry, neither of them made any effort to regain the lost wealth. They even denied themselves small pleasures in order not to exceed the boundaries of their class:

...leurs allusions au grand-père prestigieux mises à part, ils restèrent toujours fort modestes, portés même à se restreindre, à se refuser de petits plaisirs ou d'innocentes dépenses, sous le prétexte qu'il fallait "rester à sa place" et que "cela n'était pas pour eux". 53

Stéphane grew up in fear of his grandfather who dominated the entire household. The fact that the old man had but one eye, combined with his naturally domineering disposition, produced the feeling of fright that constantly plagued the youth. He felt that neither his parents nor his grandfather trusted him or approved of him.

It was during his first Communion Day that Stéphane first gave a false impression and at that time it was not of his own doing. It was expected that he would receive some type of divine

inspiration during a period of prayer immediately preceding the sacrament. He waited but the expected enlightenment did not come. Misled by the rigidity of his intense effort to feel something, his family and the priest believed that the revelation had indeed come to him and Stéphane did not deny it:

Dans l'étroit couloir, elle (sa mère) chuchote. Stéphane distingue "...extraordinaire... une telle sensibilité... transfigure, si vous l'avez vu..." Sans aucun doute, Maman a cru que c'était ça. C'est ennuyeux. Il sonde ses souvenirs, trébuche sur ces quelques secondes de sommeil, agréables. Après tout, comment saurait-il, lui? La paix merveilleuse... Façon de parler de grandes personnes—elles ont toujours tendance à exagérer, d'abord.... En somme, cette paix, c'est comme si on dormait. Cela pose, la conscience de Stéphane s'apaise. Il a ressenti ce qu'il fallait. L'appréhension diminue. Il répond à l'appel de l'Abbé. Les autres garçons qui attendent dehors, mais qui ont dû entendre quelque chose, chuchotent. L'Abbé le contemple avec émotion, de ses grands yeux marron, toujours humides. Stéphane baisse les paupières, un sentiment de triomphe l'emplit. Il ne discute plus avec lui-même. C'était ça, c'était bien cela.54

Emboldened by his initial, accidental success with deceit and convinced that his parents enjoyed illusions as was evidenced by their dwelling on Mme. Morani's ancestry, Stéphane managed to deceive them easily. Lying became natural to him:

Le mensonge s'installa peu à peu, presque sans intervention de sa part; il ne le créait pas, mais le subissait, chaque jour plus encombrant, comme un hôte indésirable qui s'incruste et qui par la force de l'habitude finit par devenir un ami.55

As a result, by the time Stéphane was about fourteen he had grown

54L'Empire céleste, pp. 217-218.
55L'Empire céleste, p. 52.
so accustomed to gaining his ends by fraudulent means that what he accomplished honestly he felt he did not deserve.

When Stéphane was sixteen, he started keeping a journal. It was also at this time that he entered a music conservatory. He felt that he had ahead of him the possibility of a successful future, but he also felt he was actually playing a role: outwardly, then, he was full of confidence; inwardly he was insecure. It proved to be very painful for him to attempt to reconcile his feeling of insecurity with the outward image he presented to the world. He continued practicing frauds in order to compensate for his feeling of inferiority.

In his journal, Stéphane refrained from recording his deceptions:

Par un mouvement peut-être naturel encore, il omettait de raconter dans ce journal, fort régulièrement tenu d'ailleurs, les petits faits humiliants ou douteux, les fraudes minuscules, dont il ne pouvait tirer gloire. Et par une sorte de magie, ces faits, ces ruses, une fois omis dans le compte rendu de sa journée, disparaissaient complètement de sa mémoire. Le mensonge avait pris pour lui valeur magique, valeur de sacrement.\(^5^6\)

The image Stéphane created in his journal must be the image that he was to present to everyone. He must appear to have great artistic and intellectual ability and a noble character. The need he felt to fool people as a youth and the need to maintain the

\(^5^6\) *L'Empire céleste*, p. 53.
false appearance of himself that he had created became his primary motivations.

Stéphane's marriage was his first major attempt to prove that he was the magnanimous individual he claimed to be. He married a local woman of ill fame precisely because of her lurid reputation rather than in spite of it. Addressing his family, Stéphane said:

Malgré cela, dites-vous? Mais non. A cause de cela. C'est à cause de cela que je l'épouse, que je sauve ce pauvre être que rien en apparence ne pouvait sauver, que je lui rends sa dignité de créature humaine... A cause de cela, oui.... Prostituée, humiliée, méprisée de tous, c'est pour cela que je l'ai aimée, que je lui ai tendu la main. Et si vous êtes incapables de comprendre cela, si pour cela vous me reniez, vous me chassez, je partirai avec elle, je passerai ma vie à ses côtés, aux côtés d'une âme qui a faim, et que je puis rassasier, d'un être tombé, à qui j'ai tendu la main...\[^{57}\]

Stéphane thought that by marrying Louise he could pose as her saviour.

The Parisian apartment house in which Stéphane and Louise lived was owned co-operatively by the tenants. The co-owners were willing to pay for only the most necessary repairs and consequently the building was rapidly deteriorating. The rooms were small and dark and Stéphane and Louise found their environment to be confining. They felt that their co-operative apartment house was a prison.

Stéphane earned a pittance playing in a club band and took

\[^{57}\] L'Empire céleste, p. 101.
it all home to his wife. He expressed his distaste when talking to a fellow musician:

Des musiciens! Mon pauvre Bruno! Nous l'avons été, peut-être, autrefois.... Mais maintenant? De vieux chevaux de retour, des fonctionnaires.... Des musiciens d'après-midi, autant dire de tasse de thé, moins que la radio.... Des musiciens de salle d'attente, on nous écoute entre deux trains....

Stéphane, then, found no satisfaction in his work.

His effort to be accepted as a worthy person met with only partial success. His wife, the person who knew him best, recognized his pretenses and insecurity. She regarded him as a weak and pitiful failure who lacked the ability to be what he claimed. Any deep feeling that she did have for him was destroyed when she learned his reasons for marrying her. Stéphane realized that Louise had lost all respect for him, but he was unable to regain it. Their relationship had degenerated into a situation pervaded by resentment and scorn. Each lived a separate life, merely sharing the same apartment: "Et ils prenaient l'un avec l'autre les précautions insultantes des êtres qui se sont beaucoup blessés." 59

Dr. Fisher, the most embittered member of the group, had a similar opinion of Stéphane, but had a better understanding of Stéphane's self-deception. His own tragic experience (his wife

58L'Empire céleste, p. 33.
59L'Empire céleste, p. 47.
had been abused and killed by the Germans while he hid in a closet) had stripped him of idealism and emotion, thus permitting him to be more detached and objective in his reactions to others. He grew impatient with Stéphane's poses concerning his wife and claimed that Louise was a much better woman than a weak character like Stéphane deserved. Dr. Fisher felt that he should not have to listen to Stéphane's vapid posturing; it should be sufficient to give him X-rays and prescribe medicine for Stéphane when the latter visited him as a patient.

The other members of the weekly social gathering accepted Stéphane as he appeared to be. They listened with admiration to his ideas and believed his claim that, except for unfortunate circumstances including his marriage, he would have been a great concert pianist. In spite of being deprived of the success that should have been his, Stéphane seemed to accept his lot without bitterness. Through an idealization of him, their own petty and inconsequential lives became more tolerable. In comparing their unfortunate circumstances with his, they felt a kinship with a person they considered to be a superior individual. By identifying with Stéphane and his acceptance of his lost career, a career which he surrendered because his noble ideals were more important to him than a selfish concern for success, they could find something worthy in the losses which they all felt that life had inflicted
Martine Florin was Stéphane's greatest admirer. She accepted unreservedly the image he labored to create. Martine, as we shall see in the next chapter, had never received kind attention and sympathetic understanding from an individual. With Martine, Stéphane's role-playing took on more vivacity. She became his most intimate confidant. Louise, Stéphane's wife, found that he was much happier when his ego was being reinforced by the credulity of a sympathetic listener. Stéphane, however, rejected Martine's amorous advances, claiming that such behavior would not be in accord with his principles. He gave her his journal to illustrate his past record of selflessness and to make his rejection seem valid:

Je vais vous prêter mon journal... Oui, mon journal intime, le récit—bien humble, bien maladroit—de mes luttes, de mes espoirs, de mes chutes aussi... Ainsi nous vivrons l'un en l'autre, par l'esprit, ainsi je n'aurai rien de caché pour vous... Vous ne pourrez plus m'accabler de ces vilains soupçons...

The journal not only contained a description of Stéphane's self-sacrificing, but also a flattering portrait of Martine.

Urged by Martine, Stéphane read his journal during one of the Monday night meetings. He hoped that the reading of the journal would serve a two-fold purpose: he would be able to eradicate certain doubts and reservations he had concerning his

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60L’Empire céleste, p. 79.
own worth and would become even more esteemed by his listeners:

... un examen: être interrogé enfin sur toutes ces matières douteuses, sur tous ces points obscurs, fournir une réponse (sa réponse) et être à la fin condamné ou absous. Ces visages attentifs autour de lui et dont un moment il avait eu peur, n'était-ce pas cela dont il a toujours en besoin? Qu'on l'écoute, qu'on lui permet d'exposer son cas et qu'on tranchât, enfin, par une note bonne ou mauvaise, une note qui serait là pour toujours, inférieure ou supérieure à la moyenne, qui parlerait pour lui, qui serait lui, et qui achèverait tout.61

The group belittled his laudatory description of Martine, however, and some members were dubious of his own self-portrait. Humiliated by this response, Martine decided to avenge herself against the entire group. By revealing that Stéphane's wife had a lover, Martine disclosed that Louise had cheapened Stéphane's noble and selfless marriage. The group pressured him into renouncing her so that their own values would remain intact. Stéphane's need for their respect was so intense that he complied with their request. His explanation to Louise of his reason for leaving her, however, was not of outraged sensibilities but rather a claim of more self-sacrifice: regardless of personal consequences, he would not be an obstacle to her happiness:

Je vois qu'enfin tu peux trouver le bonheur, un bonheur à la taille, certes, mais puisque tu le désires, je ne me reconnais pas le droit... J'ai fait pour toi ce que j'ai pu, bien maladroitement sans doute, mais de mon mieux... Je n'ai pu te donner ce que tu désirais, tu l'obtiens aujourd'hui, il ne me reste qu'à te dire bonne chance...62

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61 L'Empire céleste, p. 209.
62 L'Empire céleste, p. 356.
Stéphane hoped that Louise would not be too remorseful for he blamed himself for never having understood her.

Once alone, Stéphane was extremely unhappy: "Il fallait chasser ce sentiment d'absurdité qui l'avait envahi. Si ceci était absurde, sa vie entière..." His former existence seemed artificial—what had been important seemed to have no value.

Attempting to discover the reasons for the loss of equilibrium in his life, while seated on a bench at the railway station, Stéphane began to mentally review his life:

Déjà, il a dépassé la peur de ce soir, l'effroi d'hier; déjà, il a reconnu au passage la jouissance grimaçante et béate qu'il tirait d'une Martine soumise; déjà, il parvient à l'espoir ancien de blesser Louise, d'ouvrir, dans cette âme massive, une plaie identique à la sienne...

Et la peur dernière le prend, celle de l'enfance, celle qui n'a ni nom ni visage, et qu'il lui faudra, s'il avance encore, rencontrer... Déjà, il a dépassé la musique même, qui exigeait trop pour être une amie; plus loin, plus loin encore, il y a l'œil unique qui jugeait, et son humiliation; plus loin, il y a l'humble visage de son père, et la révolte d'un enfant devant la peur de celui qui ne lui a rien légué d'autre. Et plus loin, plus loin encore, plus douloureusement enraciné dans le cerveau et dans la chair (si bien qu'au moment où la pensée l'effleure, le corps tout entier a un sursaut), il y a l'angoisse d'être juge, la conscience d'une faiblesse sans nom, la honte de souscrire au jugement qui le condamne, et ce noeud qui retient l'âme au corps, ce point si tenu qu'il faudrait une aiguille infiniment acérée pour y toucher, la rancune contre Celui qui sait.

With his recognition that all of his previous actions had been conditioned by the resentment he felt towards God, Stéphane came to see, suddenly, that his entire life had been false:

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63 L'Empire céleste, p. 363.
64 L'Empire céleste, p. 378.
Le temps remonte son cours, comme un fleuve blanc, lumineux, palpable; les plaies ne sont plus, les monstres ne sont plus, les mots, les gestes morts se gonflent et font vie. Le passé lui-même s'anéantit, et renait justifié, le temps éclate. Tout soudain redevient plat, l'horizon s'étend dans tout les sens. L'avenir est là pose, deux objets que l'on peut nommer, sans frayeur. Il les voit, il les nomme, sans savoir s'ils sont des souvenirs ou des présages, voit les années médiocres passées à éviter son visage, voit les années médiocres qui passeront demain: les jours gris, les chambres grises, le troupeau inutile des malades, la pitié insuffisante, la bonté lassée, le mépris gentil. Une enfilade de bonnes âmes, des soins, même des joies mesquines... Il voit ces jours sans pensées, il voit même l'oubli de ce moment inoubliable, l'oubli qui est là, à deux pas. Un instant encore, il oscille dans son miraculeux équilibre—et l'oubli le submerge. Il faut vertigineusement revenir en arrière, vers cet homme aux yeux clos affalé sur le banc, qui ne sait plus rien déjà que geindre doucement, et qu'une ambulance emportera bientôt vers un monde sans pensées.

Stéphane sought complete acceptance by everyone and fabricated a world and a character of his own in his attempt to gain this acceptance. His dream world, however, alienated him from his wife and his web of fabrications was exposed when Martine read his journal. Even his closest associates came to ridicule him. Unable to stand his mediocre job, no longer supported by his fantasies as a man of importance, Stéphane lost his sanity. He was not able to extricate himself from the labyrinth. His self-interest is the most graphic example of self-illusion and self-destruction.

65 L'Empire céleste, p. 379.
Chapter VI

Elle qui eût voulu s'isoler de tout

While none of Mme. Mallet-Joris' characters is particularly attractive, Martine Florin is portrayed as being the least appealing. Martine had always felt that she was being ridiculed because of her ugliness. Her mother used to tell Martine that it was very unfortunate that she would never be able to go to college since, owing to her appearance, she could never hope to marry. Martine believed that everyone laughed at her. She sensed that she was being treated as being different from normal: some individuals were especially kind to her, others were unusually abrupt. Thus, quite naturally, Martine's unpleasant physical appearance caused her to develop certain defensive attitudes. Once again, then, we have a labyrinthian situation (in this case extreme social maladjustment) rooted in an unfortunate childhood.

Martine was born and raised in Paris. During the early years of her childhood, her father was a prominent chemist. When she was still quite young, he attempted to defraud the government but was caught. As a result, the entire family was disgraced and her father died soon after because of the intense humiliation he felt. Not long after his death, Martine and her mother
began to disagree continually. Martine wanted to earn her own living and escape from everyone connected with her former existence.

She had dreamed of securing the type of office job that would allow her to know people only on an impersonal basis. She wanted her separation from humanity to be as complete as possible. She took pride in being poorly dressed and ill-tempered and even appeared to be proud of her ugliness because it made her different.

Martine's desire to leave home and earn her own living was fulfilled. Ironically, the job she took was just the opposite of that which she had wanted. She became a clerk in the Prisunic, a chain department store in the Montparnasse section of Paris. Here she was exposed to all classes of people and scorned the women who were trying to please their husbands and families. She detested the zest for living they displayed since many of them were poverty stricken. It was not their poverty that she held against them but their exuberance that persisted in spite of everything. These people were apparently enjoying life and were happy with their lot:

Elle qui eût voulu s'isoler de tout, se mettre à l'abri de tout contact derrière une glace, elle qui ne supportait pas le spectacle de la rue, une séance de cinéma, un bruit de radio, elle se trouvait au centre de ce monde offensant, complet et fermé qu'elle ne pouvait oublier un instant.66

Martine felt that she was in the center of a world of which she could never be a part, and of which, she told herself she wanted no part.

Yet Martine found that her aloofness did not ease her unhappy life. Being disdainful and intentionally uncouth was not her ultimate desire. Thus, behind the lofty airs and proud mannerisms she displayed lay the real Martine, alone, unhappy, and insecure. She needed a tie with humanity although she could never admit it. She tried to bury her need to have normal human contacts under a false display of indifference and outwardly she was successful. Her unhappiness, however, made her desire more and more to belong, to be a part of normal life.

When Martine met Stéphane, her attitude changed:

Au moment où, peut-être, elle allait devenir folle, au centre de son isolement glacial, elle avait rencontré Stéphane... Elle possédait enfin quelque chose. Et lentement, très lentement, n'ayant pas atteint encore les limites de sa conscience, cette solitude dure et peureuse commençait peut-être à se fondre...  

She now felt that perhaps she was not so abnormal, that she could, perhaps, be a part of the world she had formerly renounced. For while she had claimed to detest the vanity of women, she now began to take pride in her appearance.

But though attentive, Stéphane was far from being as ardent as affection-starved Martine would have liked. He rejected her

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67 L'Empire céleste, p. 12.
advances, a rejection which became less painful for Martine after she was able to read his description of her in the journal. She decided that all of the members of the little group which met each Monday evening in the Empire Céleste must hear Stéphane's description of her:

Elle avait été cette "petite Antigone" dont parlait Stéphane, cette "marveilleuse amie" dont on ne pouvait imaginer les traits autrement que paisibles, qu'harmonieux, que beaux...

C'est alors qu'était né, qu'avait grandi, son désir, complaisamment bercé, cent fois pris et repris aux moments de fatigue: être cela pour tous ceux de l'Empire Céleste. 68

But Martine found that her desire for increased respect was to go unfulfilled: the group laughed at the description of her and some recognized that the journal was nothing more than a fabrication of imaginary deeds and motivations. With this failure before the group, Martine withdrew. For a time she remained confined to her room. When she ended her self-imposed isolation, she had resolved to avenge herself on everyone. Because she held Stéphane responsible for her humiliation, her rancor toward him was most intense:

Elle ne haïssait pas tant sa bêtise, sa médiocrité à lui, se disait-elle avec rage, que de s'y être laisser prendre, d'avoir travaillé tout un été à s'y laisser prendre. 69

She, therefore, decided to expose him as being a fraud. By publicly stripping him of his pretentions, she would be able

68 L'Empire céleste, p. 184.
69 L'Empire céleste, p. 260.
to destroy the false values and exaggerated ideas of personal worth of his companions. She followed Stéphane's wife in order to discover the particulars of her love affair. Later, Martine managed to talk privately with Louise's lover who told her that he wanted to marry Louise. By discussing this with the other members of the café group, she made invalid Stéphane's claim that Louise needed him. They now felt free to interrogate him concerning his wife's infidelity, making him renounce her if he were to retain the favor of the group. The spirit of the coterie was disrupted; they could no longer enjoy their reunions. Martine had attained her goal of vengeance:

Elle avait triomphé enfin. Elle l'avait atteint, elle les avait atteints.... Elle l'avait vu le visage convulsé de rage et de peur, dépouillé de toute cette prétendue douceur, de cette prétendue patience.... Ce visage était bien aussi laid que le sien, n'est-ce pas? Elle les dévoilerait tous. Le monde ne serait plus peuple, que de visages vrais, que de visages sans beauté. Le monde ne serait plus que laideur, désormais.70

She had broken free of her attachment for Stéphane. His mental collapse under the pressure of his overtaxed mind and poor health affected her very little. She found that now she was able to enjoy her work, able to accept and enjoy life as it came:

Autour d'elle se groupaient les êtres, les objets, les maisons, les rues, la ville. Des cercles, des carrés, des droites. Des couleurs, des odeurs, des formes. Des hommes enfin; et elle était d'accord.71

70L'Empire céleste, p. 267.
71L'Empire céleste, p. 379.
Martine eventually found a man and began to follow an ordinary, peaceful existence. Self-interest had been satisfied, perhaps because she desired only a limited, attainable goal, and Martine did not suffer the disillusionment common to the other characters.
Chapter VII
Tu vivras, et tu connaîtras Dieu

Les Personnages, Mme. Mallet-Joris' most recent novel, offers the reader not only a structural form which differs from her other novels, but also a complete change in setting and time. The heroine of this novel, Louise de la Fayette, belongs to the nobility. The novel is based on historical fact, depicting the court of Louis XIII and its political intrigues. Although the author does not claim that Les Personnages is a historical novel, it nonetheless is quite reminiscent of court life during the reign of Louis XIII and the career of his powerful minister, Cardinal Richelieu. While this novel does differ greatly from the previous ones in plot, setting and time, it retains elements which are similar in all of her novels: the author is merely using another time and setting to present an additional aspect of the labyrinthian world. The main character whom we shall study in this chapter shares the confusion and disillusionment common to the majority of the protagonists we have studied thus far. Louise's nobility did not save her from the warped childhood suffered by all of the principal characters of our author. She, too, as a child was subjected to unpleasant parental attitudes from which she developed
needs and desires that were to shape her future life.

Louise's father did not occupy the station in life which he believed he deserved by right of his noble birth. He was never able to obtain the position of esteem common to seventeenth century nobility. Although the family was far from being destitute, they desired much greater wealth and prestige than they possessed.

Mme. de la Fayette, the mother of Louise, was a cold, hard woman. She feigned a love and concern for her daughter which Louise detected as being false; she favored her other children, as did M. de la Fayette. She did not trust Louise and constantly plagued her with questions concerning all of her actions and thoughts. Louise would have liked to confide in her mother, but her fear prevented it. Her mother seemed to enjoy mistreating her, beating her, humiliating her. Louise believed in the authority of her father but learned that it was her mother who dominated everyone.

As a child Louise detested the coarseness and brutality of her mother and her sister, Henriette. She used to hide from everyone under the bushes in the garden and refuse to answer her mother when she was calling her. She was unable to move from her retreat. It was only there that she felt safe from the menaces that she thought surrounded her life.

Because Louise never confided in her parents, they believed
her to be guilty of some wrongdoing. Her silence coupled with her hiding during entire afternoons led her parents to believe that she did not have a clear conscience. They always tried to make her confess something in order to prove to themselves that she was being secretive. She was being secretive, but not about any overt action; she was only trying to conceal the fear that she felt. Her behavior did not fit in with their idea of the order of things.

Louise's mother sent her to a convent school when she was thirteen. She was taught the "accepted" comments to offer. In the convent she enjoyed obeying the enforced rules because the ordered life gave her security and confidence. She found a certain peace there disturbed only by the attitude of one nun toward her. That particular nun pretended a fondness for her that Louise could not understand. The way in which she looked at Louise disturbed the tranquility that she wanted to experience in the convent school:

Son curieux regard amuse. Non, elle ne m'aimait pas. Elle faisait semblant seulement, pour quelque obscure raison. -- Très bien appris, mon enfant, ce poème. Très bien étudiée, cette leçon de clavecin. (Elle rapprochait de moi ses beaux yeux noirs, inquisiteurs, malicieux: elle voulait que je la regarde.)

Thus, even in her childhood, Louise's primary preoccupation was to escape the complexities she saw in life and to find peace.

When Louise was twenty she became lady-in-waiting to the Queen, Anne d'Autriche. After a few months in attendance to the Queen, Louise's education and training attracted the attention of the King, Louis XIII, and he lost interest in his current favorite. In Louise, the King found a confidant and someone he could dominate. For her part, she found in the King's companionship a compensatory satisfaction for the many years of fear and anguish:

_Aimee d'un roi, elle, et chastement aimee. Le reve de toutes les petites pensionnaires, exauce'sans peche'. La froideur de sa mere, d'Henriette, enfin vengée, et les sarcasms de soeur Therese, enfin oubliés... Elle est heureuse, le soir, dans sa chambre, elle pense : Louise!_73

His relationship with Louise afforded the King the opportunity of asserting himself. Their meetings, which began so harmoniously as each confided in the other, invariably ended in Louise's crying because of the King's admittedly ineffectual position. Paradoxically, the outcome of the meetings for Louis was cathartic. It was intensely satisfying to the King to witness her tearful responses to his plight. Only with Louise could he feel himself to be truly a king. Although he was king, Louis was weak and indecisive.

73Les Personnages, p. 52.
The true power in the kingdom was wielded by his counselor, Cardinal Richelieu. Louis was aware that the Cardinal manipulated him, but his resentment was not strong enough to motivate him to remove the Cardinal and assume the complete leadership that was rightfully his.

Richelieu considered Louise a potential threat to his position. He wanted to be the sole manipulator of the King's will. A master of intrigue and deception, the Cardinal caused the unwitting Louise to be the center of contention of the pro- and anti-Richelieu factions. He replaced Louise's confessor with the Abbe G. who was an unprincipled opportunist. It was the abbe's responsibility to convince Louise either that she had a religious vocation or to enlist her as an ally of the Cardinal. Also involved in this conspiracy of Richelieu was Louise's sister, Henriette, who hated her.

Louise's relationship with the King alienated her from the Queen and her faction. Both factions were struggling for her allegiance. Louise was not at all interested in the aspirations of either political group and attempted to remain neutral. Her essential interest remained in her relationship with the King. The peace and security that Louise had experienced at court during her first few months was destroyed by this factional strife.
Louise maintained her characteristic silence, but it was misinterpreted by each of the factions. As with Alberte, (Les Mensonges) her silence was thought to camouflage a scheming personality, but again, as with Alberte, it was motivated by fear. Beneath the calm, proud countenance which others saw, Louise was struggling to overcome the fear and distaste which her present situation evoked. Her basic fear and unease was compounded by the strong antagonism aroused in those around her by her stubborn and almost haughty silence. The queen's reaction to her was representative:

--Qu'elle dise quelque chose, la sotte. Qu'elle m'adresse la parole, qu'elle se déplace, que je puisse la gronder un peu. Ou qu'elle s'évanouisse, enfin, puisqu'il paraît que je suis un monstre. Mais non, elle ne bougera pas, puisque je l'ai ordonné. On la tuerait sur place. Cet air buté! Elle est laide, laide... Elle me haït, sûrement. C'est son système, faire l'ange, la sainte, et Dieu sait ce qu'elle dit de moi à son roi. 4

Louise's reticence also alienated her younger companions who might have become her friends. The resentment of Françoise, another lady-in-waiting with whom she lived, is demonstrated in the following conversation:

--Voyons, Louise... Je ne vous cache rien, vous savez tout sur moi... Et vous, ne me dites jamais rien.
--Françoise, mais c'est qu'il n'y a rien à dire.
--Rien à dire! C'est le plus beau, cela. Rien à dire. Vous arrivez à la Cour, pauvre fille d'honneur comme moi, résolue d'accepter le premier qui vous demandera en mariage,

74Les Personnages, pp. 30-31.
ou d'entrer au couvent... et puis vous voilà arrivée à cette
fameuse Cour, et personne ne vous a encore demandée. Votre
marraine est en disgrâce, votre soeur vous déteste, votre
frère est accusé de je ne sais quoi, vos parents sont en
province... Vous étiez plutôt mal partie. Et voilà le
miracle, le roi vous aime! Et vous, miracle de décente,
vos n'avez même pas l'air surprise. Il n'y a rien à dire,
prétendez-vous.  

Even her confessor who was studying her very carefully for his
own purposes did not know whether Louise was extremely naive or
very astute.

A third force that exerted a disturbing effect on Louise's
existence was her family's demand that she use her influence with
the King to better their position. They had sent her to court
in the first place to advance the family welfare and contract an
advantageous marriage. Louise, however, refused to make any
demands upon the King.

Louise stubbornly ignored the desires of the opposing groups
hoping that eventually her neutral position would be accepted.
Everyone, however, continued to attempt to compromise her. In this
chaotic situation she decided that in order to find the peace she
so desired, she would accept the abbe's suggestion that she enter
a convent. The cardinal reinforced this impulse toward the
cloister. He described her situation to her:

... la personne la plus haïe de la Cour.

Mes paroles vous surprennent? Vous deviez pourtant sentir l'odeur de cette haine, vous deviez vous sentir épiée, trahie, guettée à chaque pas. Vous devez sentir maintenant ce soulagement, depuis que ces bruits de cloître ont couru? ...) Je vous ai dit que je ne voulais ni vous contraindre, ni vous persuader. Je vous prie de croire que cela est vrai. Et pourtant je voulais vous dire ces paroles: entrez au couvent, Mademoiselle. J'ai pour vous de la sympathie."

Finally the King, prompted by the Cardinal and also desirous of seeing himself glorified by having the woman who loved him renounce the world at his request, urged her to enter the convent. When Louise did decide to do so, she was attempting to satisfy the desires of others, particularly the King, as well as achieve her own goal of finding peace and order.

Once in the convent, her irrevocable decision carried out, Louise's fear did not disappear. In a long night of anguished self-examination, she struggled to overcome finally the fear and shame which had pursued her throughout her life. Her cell, which she had thought would assure her of a tranquil existence, only reawakened unpleasant memories. She felt menaced by the same phantoms which had plagued her throughout her life:

Les voilà. Ils sont dans la chambre. Ils ricanent, parce que j'avoue. Ils savent qu'ils vont se venger. Ils me pressent, ils m'étouffent de leur masse. Il y a si longtemps qu'ils me guettaient!"

Each phantom was a person she had seen play a false role. She had

77 Les Personnages, p. 152.
always refused to accept that life was part pretense, that people avoided publicly presenting their true characters. She had witnessed repeated examples of duplicity. Unable to accept the hypocrisy of those around her, she refashioned the world to her own liking:

Et c'était tous les soirs, tous les soirs depuis l'enfance. Je me refaisais ma mère. J'écartais avec soin les mots, les gestes qui m'avaient fait rougir. Je ne gardais que les sourires de parades, que les caresses officielles, celles du grand salon, quand il y avait une visite, et que Mère feignait d'avoir elle-même cousu nos rubans blancs....Je me refaisais un père plus raide, moins affâlé entre ses chiens, et j'oubliais ce regard quémandeur qu'il posait, certains soirs, sur sa femme...78

During her tortuous self-analysis Louise came to realize that people reacted toward her as they did because she seemed to be silently, steadfastly judging them. They sensed that she resented their existence:

Ils t'imploraient, tes bourreaux aux visages de cauchemar. Ne l'entendais-tu pas? "Regarde-nous!" Elles t'imploraient, cette mère tant crainte, tant repoussée. Et que disaient les cruelles d'Henriette, les punitions de soeur Philomène, les railleries de la reine? "Regarde-nous! Regarde-nous un instant seulement!" Mais ta peur les rejetait, ta peur les repoussait, ta peur les enfermait à jamais en elles-mêmes.79

This disavowal of others could only produce a profound and lasting effect on Louise:

Tu les repoussais de toutes tes forces, de toutes tes larmes, de toutes tes bonnes raisons, et petit à petit, de ta pour triomphante, naissait l'orgueil têtu d'être différente.80
Now Louise had recognized the fallacy of her reasoning and the falsity of her pride. In spite of her increased self-comprehension, her fear had not diminished. In examining her relationship with God, she found that she had all but renounced Him as well. She continued her intense self-searching through the night and when dawn arrived she was finally at peace with herself. She resolved her conflict by recognizing her own duplicity in rejecting others:


Louise is aware of the nature of her future existence and unreservedly accepts it:

Tu vivras ta vie imparfaite d'âme imparfaite, avec de petits efforts, de petites fautes, de petits remords. Tu ne seras ni une mauvaise religieuse, ni une sainte. Tu ne seras ni très heureuse, ni très malheureuse. Mais tu vivras, et tu connaîtras Dieu. Qui, toi qui n'avais que la force de ton refus, toi faible, et craintive, et limitée à un univers si petit, tu connaîtras Dieu cependant, que tu avais fui si longtemps. Tu connaîtras que tu n'es pas de ces âmes qu'il comble, ni même qu'il éprouve à son feu. Tu connaîtras que ta place est petite, et qu'encore il te faut toutes tes forces pour la remplir... Tu ne sauras plus rien sur cette nuit où tu t'es toi-même découverte. Tu vivras, et tu mourras aussi, en l'an 1665, sans beaucoup de peine, rendant ton âme à Dieu, puisque tu as une âme, depuis cette nuit. 82

81 Les Personnages, p. 245.
82 Les Personnages, p. 246.
In resolving her labyrinthian situation, Louise also regains her faith.

Like Hélène and Martine, then, Louise succeeded in emerging from the labyrinth which she entered as a child. Ironically, those who thought they were manipulating her were merely impelling Louise along the path of her own self-interest and inclination. She was, therefore, neither a victim of their machinations nor was she duped. Unlike Alberte, Louise attained the peace and order that had always been her goal.
Conclusion

Tu t'es toi-même découverte

The common origin of the labyrinthian situations of our author's major protagonists has been repeatedly illustrated in the previous chapters. This repeated similarity, too consistent to be coincidental, indicates the author's belief that childhood dupery and deception are the primary factors which cause an individual to become involved in a labyrinth. Formative agents other than parental which could influence a child in developing attitudes and standards are completely ignored in Mallet-Joris' novels. Influences that could come from individuals that one respects or admires are totally lacking in these works. No normal relationships between children of the same age group are to be found. In every situation the protagonist had a lonely childhood. Regardless of the social class to which he belongs, each character as a child feels himself to be a victim of a hypocritical adult world. In defense against this outer world which they cannot control and whose values they cannot understand, they turn inward and come to hate it. Seeking to avoid it, they become completely self-centered. This explains a common attribute of the author's major characters: each one is so intent upon satisfying his own desires and surmounting personal dilemmas that he has no concern for others. The instances of genuine selfless concern for others are very few in these works and, most
significant, the persons who are least aggressive inevitably meet with rejection or scorn. Their passive attempts to achieve their common goals of peace and tranquility are regarded as being merely clever subterfuges.

The desire for self-fulfillment that each character has is nourished by bitterness which at times reaches the intensity of revenge. They all set out on a search for their own self-satisfaction. The parental influences are responsible for the direction that each quest takes as each character strives to attain his particular aspirations. Each character judges every event by its effect on his personal desires whether they be sensual thrills, peace and tranquility, or wealth.

Only Louise and Alerte continue to be powerless victims of exterior wills. The others are personally responsible for their involvement in entanglements. Invariably, the pursuit of self-interest only results in further disillusionment similar to that suffered in childhood. Thus their actions, though highly dramatic, are self-destroying.

There is a great diversity in the manner of presentation of the major characters' physical environment. Each personnage is presented as living in an urban center but this is the sole similarity. Aside from their common city backgrounds there is a great contrast in the areas and types of housing in which they live.
Mme. Mallet-Joris' description of the physical environment is nearly photographic in its detail. This is even more noticeable when one realizes that he can visualize the physical setting of each work, but is unable to imagine the physical appearance of the characters themselves.

Physical environment, financial and occupational status, play the same role in these works. They are significant in determining the limitations of the actions of the individuals but the characters' reactions to their immediate environment are basically dependent upon their personalities rather than on the environment itself.

The characters' economic, social, and occupational situations are varied yet none of them is so impoverished that he strives to satisfy the basic needs of food, shelter, or clothing. Our author is not interested in the realistic chronicling of social suffering but considers the variations in social and economic position of the bourgeoisie to be influences on personality and the individual's reaction to his situation. This use of these elements, combined with the emphasis on the selfish characteristics of the individual human, illustrates the author's interest in the individual as an asocial being bound by necessity rather than choice to his fellow humans.

The previous chapters have presented some indication of the great variety of relationships occurring in the works of Françoise
Mallet-Joris. There is the Lesbian relationship between Hélène and Tamara, Hélène's love affair with Jean, the lechery of Klaes, and the undemanding love of Louise for her King. The minor characters add greater variety. Louise, the wife of Stéphane, is unfaithful; Stani, friend of Hélène, is feverishly seeking a liaison with some wealthy woman who will support him and his mother in luxury; the Abbe' has a history of love affairs, and others flit even more casually through various amatory incidents.

Mallet-Joris explores these relationships quite thoroughly, stressing each character's reactions to the new situations in the light of his past. These earlier relationships inevitably furnish the experiences which have formed the character when first we meet him; they also provide the situations which develop the plot of each of the novels. Yet here again, in all this variety of contacts, there is a notable absence of an attitude which would necessarily have to be included in any all-embracing presentation of human relationships and attitudes.

There is a lack of any criticism of personal actions, either of self or of others, based on moral grounds. Relationships which society would condemn are treated as being amoral rather than immoral. Hélène's Lesbian relationship with Tamara is presented matter-of-factly and is neither condemned nor judged. Those who are aware of it accept it without surprise or comment. In every
novel there is a great deal of criticism, but this stems primarily from selfish interests, not from any feeling of outraged ideals or sensibilities.

Notable in this treatment of the labyrinths of the characters is the equality with which Mallet-Joris treats male and female protagonists. Each one is admirably presented as a credible figure with realistic problems and plausible reactions. The women tend to be stronger-willed and have greater success in eventually coping with their problems. Alberte alone remains enmeshed in her labyrinth. Klaes is perhaps the most assertive character presented, but he has no more success in emerging from his maze than do the other male characters.

The conflict in these novels is primarily psychological as each character struggles with a dilemma comprised entirely of mental attitudes. There is no violence and physical action is limited. Flashbacks provide the essential information concerning the past history of the characters and the present situation and desires are presented through stream-of-consciousness techniques and the comments of disinterested observers. Throughout, the primary emphasis is on what the character feels. The denouements of their situations center around self-analysis rather than on physical action.

Each character comes to consider his situation honestly
and those who emerge from their labyrinths do so because they have become aware of, and accepted, themselves and their role for what they are: people who have deceived and have been deceived, people who are selfish and not all-important, people who will never again be certain of lasting happiness. Stéphane cannot accept the realization that his life has been a fraud; Klaes does not have time for the introspection that might lead to awareness; Jean and Alberte achieve a brief awareness but rather than accept the burden imposed by self-realization, they ignore it. The remaining three characters, Hélène, Martine, and Louise, accept their own limitations.

None of Mallet-Joris' characters is truly happy and only those who learn to accept their circumstances find a relative calm. There is a steady decrease from the initial emphasis placed on thrill-seeking which is the motivation of the characters of the first two novels to the spiritual denouement of Les Personnages. The final stage of this transition is in accord with the following statement made by the author in an interview concerning the last novel:

Pour moi la vérité religieuse consiste à trouver en soi ce qu'on a de plus authentique et à vivre en harmonie avec cette découverte.  

Although Louise is the only character who discovers a religious truth, all of the characters evidence Mallet-Joris' conviction that

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in order to achieve an inner harmony, one must first achieve self-understanding.
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