

## The Wounded Drama of Salvation in Georges Bernanos

"If we were to look well into it, we would, quite on the contrary, see in the interior man's expression an oceanlike agitation and an anguish for perfection that are a road without end—the road of a creation oriented toward eternity . . . . Our corpselike world needs the scandal of poetry, just as it needs the scandal of truth, because scandal does not consist in telling the truth but in not telling it entire, without introducing little gaps and little shifts that disfigure it, both as poetry and as truth."—Letter to Jorge de Lima, Jan 1942.

"I believe this world will end one day. I believe that our species, as it moves toward its end, retains in the depths of its consciousness much to throw off the psychologists, the moralists, and other such ink-lapping brutes. It would seem that what really rules our affective life is the foreboding of death. What, then, will happen to our affective life when death's foreboding will have been replaced by the presentiment of the catastrophe that is to swallow up our whole species?"—*The Grand Cemeteries under the Moon* (1938)

"The Body of the Church moves only when impelled by the interior Being dwelling within it. This Being is normally absorbed in contemplation and prayer but is also extraordinarily sensitive to certain mysterious warnings and signs that only it perceives. And, naturally, the Body always finds the Spirit's impulse to be initially painful. The Body of the Church is never more wretched than at the very moment when the Spirit is about to triumph."—*What for, Freedom?* (1953)

### Overview

Broadly speaking, Georges Bernanos' career can be divided into three periods:

1922-1930—His first three novels, marked by more distortion and sarcasm. During these years, while not a member of the organization, Bernanos continues to have some public sympathy for *Action Française*, the French royalist and conservative nationalist movement.

1931-1937—Publishes his less successful mystery, *A Crime*, and works on and puts aside *Night is Darkest* and *Monsieur Ouine*. Publishes his best known works, *The Diary of a Country Priest* and *Mouchette*, both of which are marked by a more realistic tone, though they also exhibit Bernanos' characteristic dialogue driven style. He also completes his book on the Spanish Civil War.

1938-1948—Bernanos and his family move to South America (first Paraguay, then Brazil). Bernanos writes a number of non-fiction works, including *The Grand Cemeteries under the Moon*, *Les Enfants humiliés*, and various other political addresses. He completes *Monsieur Ouine*, as well as the play *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, the later which will be published posthumously.

### A Catholic Humanist?

Is it correct to call Georges Bernanos a Catholic humanist? Perhaps. He was certainly a man deeply moved by the conditions of humanity, and his concern for the poor marked his fiction and non-fiction equally. At the same time, the term "humanist" may be a misnomer in Bernanos' case since so much of his life, novelistic focus, and even non-fictional writings were concerned with the pathos of the human struggle for redemption, a struggle defined as much, if not more, by the action of God upon the person, as by the person's attempts to come to terms with that divine action. Merit and grace, nature and supernature, are intertwined in the economy of God, and therefore, not really separable. To call him a humanist misses the point, unless we set that humanistic concern within the great drama of the soul coming under the lordship of Christ.

We have not really understood the puzzle of human life if we do not deal with the overwhelming reality of evil. In speaking to the world of sin, the temptation for the writer is to absorb the sin, even by the

counter-sins of contempt and despair. If the danger of disenchantment is one gutter along the road, the other is a choking bitterness. The indignant spirit of true love arises out of the spirit of Christ and jealousy on Christ' behalf. We must see others' with compassion, and for Bernanos, the task of the Christian writer is to bring together the work of redemption with that of literary representation.

The interior struggle with our sin includes the struggle with Satan. Because of our own rebellion and pride, we need to accept the humiliations that come our way. Bernanos is not really a writer of theodicy, but one who experiences the wounds of God before the woundedness of the world. He does treat evil and suffering within an eschatological framework, but this is not so much a compensatory answer to evil as it is the narrative shape of the human journey. We are all born into a world on our way to our deaths, and within certain traditions of Christian reflection, the agony of death is a moment of profound purification and transcendence, even a moment of deep self-understanding. In our deaths we know ourselves for the first time. Perhaps this is why the road is such an important symbol of him. Any overly saccharine vision of Christianity that does not face faithfully the struggle of life is a partial lie at best. We only see our temporal lives because eternity renders them visible. Such is the fruit of continual prayer.

### Freedom and the Frustrated French Royalist

For Bernanos, freedom can only be understood within the context of love. Our freedom is found in submission to God; we reason and feel and act out of the heart centered in the will of God. Without the end of human sanctity, we do not understand what freedom for. We find our freedom as we risk losing it in deliberate action; in that, service (as opposed to slavery) is only possible because we are free to offer it. Obedience, then, is the necessary school for our learning to think well, just as self-surrender returns to us ourselves as we turn outward to others and their pain. In this way, the pathos of freedom is essential; we must wage war against our own indifference. Human freedom includes the freedom to speak; for the Christian, that freedom is to speak the truth and to trust in the effect of truth. To do so may render us naked before the world's power, yet this witness is often the only way for truth to be made manifest.

Bernanos was skeptical of system, so he is especially skeptical of the modern world's attempts to control our free speech, especially in the name of other freedoms. A true commitment to freedom takes courage, the courage to endure disapproval, even scandal. Propaganda is always about reducing our personhood to imbecility, including to that of cowardice to speak apart from political parties. Bernanos believed that if all the truths, though contradictory, are freely expressed, they would eventually correct each other. There is an important difference between curiosity and true knowledge. The former is knowledge without charity, and it can be an addictive craving that has no end beyond the self's perpetual hunger.

Bernanos was an outspoken opponent of French political capitulation and the modern machine society. His own direct involvement in *Action Française* did not continue after 1920—he was never an actual member, though he defended the organization even after the official papal condemnation, yet he eventually reached a point of great disaffection with the group's many problems and broke with Maurras in 1930. His disappointment was even greater with Catholic Fascism in Spain. He wrote openly and with great candor about the atrocities in Spain during a time when many within Catholicism took a more muted tone.

Bernanos was also an blunt critic of the Church, yet he never saw himself as anything other than her faithful son. He was an Augustinian in that he held the Church in time to always be a mixture of wheat

and tares, of the faithful and of the false, which only the angels in the Last Judgment may sort. In the meanwhile, the Church must minister to the fallible, even the disobedient “dead parish.” The Church is culpable for modernity’s rejection of the faith. Hypocrite Christians are why so many turn from the truth. At the same time, a Church of sinners is the only Church humans could be at home. A “congregation of supermen” would have nothing for us.

### The Adventure of Sanctity

Because at the heart of Bernanos’ vision is freedom, his literary characters have the freedom to change, and they are often in great spiritual duress, whether they are dominated by evil or by grace more successful in opposing it. He often renders them at the point of great temptation and decision. Indeed, the interior lives of characters are the predominant burden of his novels. Many of Bernanos’ protagonists are saints, and the mystery of their sanctity surrounds them. Unlike the closed world of the sinner, the saint acts as a rupturing force, reopening the self-delusions of others. The prayer lives of the saints are full of co-suffering with others, and the experience of forgiveness is the experience of prayer, too. To experience the agony of others is to imitate the agony of Christ. The saints in their simplicity are not after self-knowledge; they only turn inward that they may turn outward to Christ. They are after one thing: purity of being.

Bernanos holds that “sanctity is an adventure . . . the terror of a superhuman hope” (qtd. Balthasar 261). We only know ourselves in knowing ourselves in God, and the gift of time is to be turned toward our future in God. The saints are for the rest of us a sign of what we all are after, only more haltingly. The saints enter into paths that seem without precedent, dark nights of the soul, and their suffering may be as much from the Church as from outside the Church. How this adventure manifests itself is different in Bernanos’ various novels. Some are marked by more joy, others by more despair. His early novels, *Under the Sun of Satan*, *The Imposter*, and *Joy*, are far more melodramatic than his middle-period masterpieces, *The Diary of a Country Priest* and *Mouchette*. *Monsieur Ouine*, being written on-and-off over a decade, displays elements of both periods. Some consider it his most important novel. It is certainly his darkest, a meditation on the depths of evil and spiritual malaise that can possess a whole community.