GEORGES BERNANOS

WITH the death of Bernanos, France lost more than a novelist. His was the authentic voice of a tradition that is older than a nation and which will surely outlast it. It is true that he wrote novels, and they were supreme in their perception of human destiny, incomparable in eloquence and passion. But the form of them was an instrument, not an end, and the professional critic may readily discover an indifference, even a contempt, for the nicely-ordered ingenuities of fiction. Bernanos was a prophet for whom the novel, or indeed prose as such, happened to be a trumpet to which his own generation might be enticed to listen. He believed in God and he believed in God's hand at work in the affairs of men. For him the only ultimate truth was the plenitude of divine life, and he looked with an unfaltering vision on a world in which that life was usually ignored, sometimes acknowledged, but which in every case was the arena of a conflict that can end only with the Last Judgment of all.

The popular success of the *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne* made a central idea of Bernanos's familiar to readers to whom *Sous le Soleil de Satan* or *Monsieur Ouine* might seem intolerable, unreadable, remote. The huge weight that hangs on moral choice became increasingly for Bernanos a truth to be revealed not merely in the high moments of human tragedy but constantly, at every turn of the head, at every neutral gesture. Sin and its consequences are not data set apart from human life, a moralist's subject away from the stress of ordinary duty or decision. The denial of God began long ago, and he is denied so long as men remain blind to his light, deaf to his voice. And men are terribly blind, terribly deaf. Is there no hope, then? For Bernanos the manifest tragedy of human iniquity is not a plague to be described; it is a situation to be redeemed. But first it must be recognised for what it is. There can be no turning away from the inherited misery of sin, or, rather, there can be none until the divine justice is accepted, the divine goodness adored.

In *La Joie*[1] all the elements of Bernanos's power are to be discerned. Its thesis is not, perhaps, so concentrated as that of the *Journal*; it certainly lacks the strange terror of *Monsieur Ouine*. But its central figure, Chantal, is Bernanos's loveliest character. She, the innocent one, is encompassed by evil in its fulness: her father, hypochondriac and vain, is the foolish agent of her tragedy. He surrounds himself with men who minister to his vanity. There is a psychiatrist,

1 Recently translated by Louise Varese (The Bodley Head, 9s. 6d.).

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who is the very figure of intellectual arrogance: the arbiter of other men's destinies, he is mean and afraid. There is a priest who has ceased to believe in God, and for him madness in the end is his way back to faith. There is a sinister Russian chauffeur, deliberately made more than life-size in iniquity so that he may personify evil in its strongest assault. The presence of Chantal in the country house among these figures (for such they are: a cosy realism gives place to the necessity of the moral issue to be resolved) establishes a conflict that is harrowing in its implications. Like the devils in Hell, these evil men acknowledge, with the psychiatrist, that 'You have finally got the better of all of us; we are at your mercy'. It is Chantal's singleness of soul, her simple acceptance of God (the influence of St Thérèse's 'Little Way' is plain) that affront the pride and envy and hatred of men who have turned away from God. The debate is not in terms of an intellectual acceptance or rejection of divine providence. It is altogether deeper at the level of a holiness that exasperates evil, makes of its servants Gadarene swine, maddened by the presence of God.

In *Monsieur Ouine*[2] Bernanos departs even further from the conventions that ask only of a novelist that he should recapitulate a probable human situation. His satanic M. Ouine moves in dimensions proper to his nature, and the life of the village he dominates moves in a trance-like freedom from measurable time and space. Here evil is much more openly declared, the Devil's presence much more candidly revealed. But in all his novels Bernanos, whatever the idiom he uses may be, is declaring the absolute rights of God and therefore the moral conflict that springs from men's response to them. That is why, as M. Jacques Madaule has pointed out, priests occupy so important a place in the Bernanosian firmament. The Devil attacks a priest with special ferocity because in his dual character of man and God's minister the possibilities for evil are infinite. With the apostasy of a priest the destinies of countless other souls are also engaged. In a priest the battle is on at its fiercest and the *curés* of Bernanos's novels are his most carefully observed characters: their souls are an arena where Satan is specially active.

But Bernanos was not a writer who claimed immunity from the demands of the society to which he belonged. The moral conflict that is at the heart of human life is not a speculative theme for a novelist, merely. It is experienced every day everywhere, in families, cities, nations. Thus it was not a matter for wonder that Bernanos should,

2 cf. C.-E. Magny, *La part du diable dans la littérature contemporaine* in *Satan* (Etudes Carmélitaines) for a magnificent study of this novel.

in *Les Grandes Cimetières sous la Lune*, give to the world a blistering indictment of Franco's followers in the Spanish Civil War. Bernanos, a traditionalist, the open enemy of the secular democracy of which the Spanish Republic was a faithful enough representative, might have been expected to add his voice to the great majority of his fellow-Catholics in seeing Franco's movement as a crusade and its adherents as the defenders of God and his laws. Bernanos judged these claims by what he himself saw in Majorca, and his book will remain a classic exposure of the evil power that invokes fine ends and pollutes them by means that destroy justice and charity alike.

Bernanos was spared the agony of life in German-occupied France. From South America his *Lettre aux Anglais* revealed afresh his confident trust in the primacy of the law of God and his bitter recognition of men's failure to implement it. He returned to France to see old evils made worse, and his last book, *La France Contre Robots*, is in some respects his greatest. It is an angry book, the witness of betrayal and disillusionment. Freedom has been sold and man lies imprisoned behind the bars of a totalitarianism of the spirit more terrible than any tyranny. Modern warfare 'makes the destruction of thousands of innocents a job a man can do without soiling his cuffs or his imagination'; we live in a world without pity, we are in at the birth of a civilisation that is consciously inhuman. Bernanos is obsessed with the problem of the individual conscience confronted with the demands of the omnipotent state, anonymous, ruthless in its claim to compel men even to kill the innocent. And so Bernanos, sick at heart in the presence of an evil more cataclysmic than even his imagination had ever devised, in his last words repeated his constant theme of man's freedom to choose, even in the darkest days of the new 'Civilisation of the Machines'. 'It is only a free man who is capable of service, for service is of its nature an act of the will; it is the homage which a free man gives to that which he loves'. Man must preserve his freedom to serve, or humanity itself must be destroyed.

It is too soon to assess the true status of Bernanos. In some ways the heir of Bloy, in others the necessary complement to Mauriac, he is yet magnificently alone. This much is certain. In him the responsibility of the Catholic artist was nobly exemplified. Beneath the rhetoric and the anger there was a constant heart, a clean mind, and a compassion without measure.

ILLTUD EVANS, O.P.

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