

*Dominique* was published the same year in December, but there is no extant manuscript of the latter and so it is not known for certain whether it was composed before or after the Interview. See Notes, Vol. I, pp. 1319, 1649.

- 11 *Saint Dominique*, Vol. I, p. 4.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Interview, Vol. I, p. 1043.
- 14 *Sous le soleil de Satan*, Oeuvres, p. 308.
- 15 *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, Oeuvres, p.1143.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p.1157.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 1241.
- 18 *Ibid.* p. 1256.
- 19 Albert Béguin, *Bernanos par lui-même* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1954), p. 112.
- 20 *Saint Dominique*, Vol. I, p. 5.
- 21 Bernanos changed his mind about identifying the Order with the charity of its founder over the matter of the Inquisition. See *Les grands cimetières sous la lune*, Vol. I, p. 390; Notes, p. 1329.
- 22 Bernanos succeeds better than he had with St. Dominic in making Joan of Arc seem like a real human being. Nevertheless the humanity is still subordinated to a now revised conception of sanctity. See *Jeanne, relapse et sainte*, Vol. I, pp. 21–42.
- 23 *Journal.*, Oeuvres, p. 1245.

## **‘Great Cemeteries Under the Moon’: Bernanos and the Spanish Civil War**

Fernando Cervantes

It is not often that a single work of literature can be earmarked as a watershed in its author’s intellectual development, but *Les grands cimetières sous la lune* seems to offer an almost incontestable case for such an honour. Before its publication in 1938, its author, Georges Bernanos, had been widely known as conservative royalist who had had no qualms about openly supporting Charles Maurras and *L’Action française*, even after their condemnation by the pope in 1926. Thus it was only to be expected that a book by Bernanos, inspired by the Spanish Civil War, would at least echo the staunch support that Maurras and his followers were giving General Franco. Yet *Les grands cimetières* was not only bitterly critical of Franco and the

*Falange*, but it also wasted no opportunity to launch some especially vitriolic attacks on Maurras himself, attacks which signalled a definitive break with the French conservative establishment. How could Bernanos' outlook and central convictions have undergone such a radical transformation?

I shall argue that to pose the question in such terms can prove highly misleading. For if it is true that *Les grands cimetières* marks a watershed, it is no less true that it was primarily the scandal that the book caused among Bernanos' French readers, rather than any fundamental change in Bernanos' basic thinking, that caused such a watershed. Indeed, as the emphatically reluctant tone of the book attests, Bernanos himself was acutely conscious of this danger. 'I am not a writer,' he tells us, 'The mere sight of a blank page fills me with anguish.'<sup>1</sup> In his mind, the issue was not so much to write a book about the Spanish Civil War, but rather to give voice to the veritable explosion of feelings that the event had ignited in him, and to vent his formidable spleen against a world he perceived to be on the brink of destruction. In such a context Spain became the microcosm of a more general European malaise. 'The Spanish Tragedy is a cesspit,' he wrote. 'All the errors that are causing Europe's agony, and which she is desperately trying to vomit in the midst of dreadful convulsions, have gathered together to rot there.'<sup>2</sup>

*Les grands cimetières*, therefore, is in no way committed to any of the causes at stake. To pretend otherwise is radically to misunderstand it. In fact Bernanos never even sought to explain events or to suggest solutions. His method was at once more simple and more profound. He spoke directly to his readers out of the depths of his spirit, never losing sight of his 'profound certainty that the one portion of the world that can still be salvaged belongs entirely to the children, the heroes, and the martyrs.'<sup>3</sup> His voice has the unmistakable ring of an intimate knowledge of suffering and anguish and of their close relation to faith. Hence its sharp prophetic tone: 'The rage of the imbeciles has always filled me with sadness' he exclaimed at the beginning of the book; 'but today it fills me with terror. The whole world is being shaken by this rage.'<sup>4</sup>

Who were the imbeciles? Bernanos' choice of word was surely intended to convey the full Latin and colloquial nuances. But, like everything in Bernanos, the term also conveyed a deep compassion; for the imbeciles were not aware of their limitations and were thus unable to recognise their pitiful condition. Although they had always existed, the modern world had made something fundamentally new and disturbing out of them:<sup>5</sup>

It was a mad imprudence to have uprooted the imbeciles. ... A colony of imbeciles solidly attached to its native soil, like mussels to a rock, can appear harmless and even furnish the state and industry with valuable material. The imbecile is above all a creature of habit and prejudice. Uprooted from his environment he may still retain, between his tightly closed shells, some of the water of the pond that nourished him. But modern life does not merely transport imbeciles from one place to another: it shakes them about in a kind of fury. The gigantic machine, working at full throttle, devours them by their thousands and spreads them around the globe to satisfy its outrageous whims. Never before has a society consumed these wretched individuals in such prodigious numbers. It devours them ... when their shells are still soft, and it does not even allow them to grow old. It knows very well that with age ... the imbeciles will develop that imbecile wisdom that coarsens them.<sup>6</sup>

The theme was a familiar one at the time. Man had made the machine and the machine was in the process of replacing man. The equilibrium could only be restored through a vigorous defence of human freedom, but such freedom needed to be understood in the first place *not* as a right, but as a duty, a burden and, as Bernanos would always insist, an honour.

The defence of freedom was, therefore, an heroic and almost impossible task in societies that had ensconced such large quantities of imbeciles in power through the modern democratic process. For democracy merely flattened out the human spirit and levelled the different estates and classes in society. The development, in fact, went directly against freedom and could only lead to extreme forms of totalitarianism, no matter how much the modern democracies thought the contrary.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it was precisely democracy that was responsible for substituting any number of cretinous ideologies for a sane conception of the world, with all their 'right' and 'left' and other 'idiotic classifications' without which the imbeciles would feel incapable of thinking.<sup>8</sup> 'The one effort of which they are really incapable', Bernanos asserted, 'is thinking for themselves. They would rather kill than think, that is the misfortune. ... While they await the machine that will allow them to think ... they are blissfully happy with a killing machine; it fits them like a glove;'<sup>9</sup> and they 'will fight to the death for a conception of the world, society, and life that excuses them from having to judge and to choose.'<sup>10</sup>

Admittedly, there is nothing startlingly new or original in Bernanos' analysis of modern society and its enslaving effects. One of the most influential books of the time, José Ortega y Gasset's *La rebelión de las masas*, which first appeared in Spain in 1930, had

already provided a lucid and exhaustive analysis of the triumph of the imbecile and the danger that modern democracies posed to human freedom.<sup>11</sup> What is distinctive in Bernanos' analysis is his deep sense of solidarity with the imbeciles. It was no good simply to point out the problem from a rational, analytical standpoint. This would amount to turning intelligence into a *profession* rather than a *vocation*. Indeed, the intellectual himself was 'so often an imbecile that we should always take him for one until he has demonstrated the contrary.'<sup>12</sup> He epitomised the imbecility of those who wanted 'to be informed about everything and ... to understand nothing.'<sup>13</sup> The real challenge was not to analyse, or even to explain, but to *engage*. To be a Christian meant to accept from grace the responsibility for the world. The Christian — the genuine Christian, the *chrétien de chrétienté* — was the salt of the world, someone for whom the gospel was 'no mere anthology from which we read an extract every Sunday.' No! 'The gospel informs the laws, the customs, the sorrows, and even the *pleasures*, for in it are blessed not only the humble hopes of man, but also the fruits of his entrails'.<sup>14</sup>

Here Bernanos touches passionately upon a theme that is central to his thought. It would become the main thread of a book of politico-cultural criticism published only a year after *Les grands cimetières*, entitled *Nous autres français*, in which he would champion an *incarnate* Christianity. The point was to confront a 'spiritualised Church' as well as, and before, a 'materialised world'. The modern Christian ethos of retreat into the shelter of the 'supernatural', he pointed out, had had the devastating effect of parading all the weaknesses, hypocrisies, and resentments stigmatised by Nietzsche. The phenomenon was based on a false psychology, which understood faith as a transcendence of the spirit over the body, rather than seeing it correctly as an act, the only act, where both body and spirit *together* transcended towards God. As one of Bernanos' most endearing characters had already intimated, 'sometimes I feel as if [my faith] had gone hiding, as if it had withdrawn into a place where it would never occur to me to look for it: in my flesh, in my wretched flesh ... my mortal but baptised flesh'.<sup>15</sup>

A further implication here was that the modern Christian attitude of 'supernaturalism' went hand in hand with the growth of 'Pharisaism' within the Church. This was the very ground where imbeciles thrived, for it made it radically impossible for the gospel to be the salt of the earth. It was not the sinfulness or imperfection of Catholics or churchmen that irritated Bernanos. What he could not abide was the widespread assumption —in France no less than in Spain— that the

failings and imperfections of the Church should be argued away at all costs with pious pretexts. 'If the world were the masterpiece of an architect obsessed with symmetry or of a professor of logic,' he explained, '... then indeed the Church would have to offer a spectacle of perfection and order'. But who would feel at home in such a Church? Bernanos' Church was more like 'a family home, a father's house ... where the chairs are often broken, the tables are stained with ink, and the jam jars are empty but carefully put away in the pantry....',<sup>16</sup> a Church where a committed father of six children with financial difficulties could feel at home.

It was no great surprise that such a Church should pose a scandal to the unbeliever. She claimed to be the community of the children of God, yet she offered a pitiful spectacle of mediocrity. Bernanos had no intention of denying that the Church was indeed a source of scandal, but what all his political writings from *Les grands cimetières* onwards aimed to do, was to show that the Church was a scandal in a deeper and different sense to what external observers imagined. With his characteristic method, Bernanos put a masterly reaction to the Church's scandal in the mouth of an unbeliever who had been invited to preach to a congregation of respectable Catholics on the feast of St Thérèse of Lisieux. The result was an exquisite turning of the tables; for the unbeliever was a man of good faith who honoured the Catholic saints' 'extraordinary quality' and 'incomparable humanity'. Yet he could not see how the saints could have suffered and struggled so much merely to provide Christians with a joy which could not be shared by the 'thousands of poor devils who have never heard of these heroes and who, in order to know them, can count on nobody but you'! He knew, too, that Christians never bothered about what unbelievers thought or felt; they simply avoided the issue 'for fear of losing their faith'; whereas unbelievers as a rule cared deeply about the beliefs of Christians: 'We thought you were interesting ... but you are not ... and ... we suffer for the humiliation of having hoped in you; that is, of having had doubts about ourselves, about our incredulity'.<sup>17</sup>

The world's obduracy, in other words, went hand in hand with the world's disappointment with the Church. Indeed, when Christians pointed to the 'blindness' of unbelievers and judged it to be more culpable than that of the Jews at the time of Jesus, they were forgetting that those responsible for the death of Jesus belonged precisely to the pious class. 'You can say and do what you will', the unbeliever exclaimed,

but deicide can never again be included in the class of crapulous crimes. It is a distinguished crime, the most distinguished of crimes,

an unusual crime, committed by opulent priests with the approval of the great bourgeoisie and the intellectuals of the time ... You can joke as much as you like, my dear brethren, but it was not the communists or those who commit sacrilege that nailed the Lord to the cross.<sup>18</sup>

As already indicated, this disturbing Pharisaism within the Church was inseparable from an insistence on supernaturalism and its misguided escape from the world. Consequently, Bernanos saw the mediocrity of Christianity increasing in proportion as the virtues proper to priests within their sphere were exalted and made into the fundamental virtues of ordinary Christians. For the result was the substitution of a vague and general compliance and willingness to oblige for genuine Christian obedience. As Hans Urs von Balthasar put it, 'it is the story of an ever more radical *émigration à l'intérieur*' concerned almost exclusively with 'the preservation of traditional positions that guarantee the material possessions of the ruling classes'. When the impulse to flee from oneself, so characteristic of the imbeciles, took place within the Church, everything became 'spurious and fallacious from top to bottom' and a conspiracy emerged between '*modern man*, with his tendency to flee from himself, a *Church* ... more and more ... filled with such men ... and ... the *state*, which knows how to profit from this peculiar form of human being ...'.<sup>19</sup> It was a conspiracy destined to impose the reign of mediocrity. Hence Bernanos' insistence that 'the average Christian' had acquired all the defects of the mediocre, 'with a supplementary dose of pride, of hypocrisy, not to speak of a shameful ability to resolve all the cases of conscience in his favour'.<sup>20</sup>

This was the attitude that Bernanos attacked in the Spanish hierarchy and Catholic bourgeoisie, whom he accused of cowardice, fear, egotism, and, more dramatically, of having forsaken the workers by consciously detaching the Church from her roots in the people. By contrast with what had happened in France, where 'anticlericalism, like syphilis, was from the start an ailment of the bourgeoisie', in Spain it was the poor, the dispossessed, the marginalised, in short, those very people for whom the Church primarily existed, who had become her most vociferous enemies. The result was that they themselves were, in turn, being accused by the Catholics and all those who supported Franco's 'crusade' of being 'God's enemies'. But was it not dangerous, Bernanos asked the bishops, 'to assert that a country with such prodigious spiritual reserves could be so suddenly struck by the hatred of God as if by a pest'? Was it not more sensible to admit that the best therapy for mediocrity was the admission of one's insufficiency? It was plain, he told the bishops, that the world was full of 'miserable people

whom the Church has disillusioned. No one would dream of telling you this truth so plainly if only you deigned to recognise it with humility. It is not your faults that they reproach you. It is not because of your faults that they are shocked; it is because of your pride!<sup>21</sup>

But the bishops persisted in their pride, attempting to explain the 'prudence' of their behaviour by authoritative appeals to that other of Bernanos' recurring *bêtes noires*: casuistry. Casuistry, for Bernanos, was unmistakably the morality of the supernaturalist, of the person who would not come to terms with human nature and whose religion often degenerated into a struggle between duty and inclination.<sup>22</sup> Bernanos' *incarnate* Christianity, by contrast, never sought to strive towards an unattainable Christian ideal. If the Christian, as Bernanos insisted, already lived out of the substance and reality of faith, then the casuistry of the law was absorbed by the simplicity of the truth. This much was obvious. Even the most superficial reader of St Paul would be aware of it.

It was with this in mind that Bernanos championed the chivalric notion of 'honour' against the supernaturalist's notion of 'duty'. Honour was for him the one attitude that the modern world, and especially the bourgeois Church, most lacked. And yet it was the absolute ethical foundation.<sup>23</sup> Honour alone imparted moral splendour, personal dignity, and divine likeness to the fulfilment of the commandments. Indeed, without honour, the fulfilment of any temporal duty was as useless and vain as were the moral virtues without love. The position occupied by honour in the natural sphere was thus analogous to that occupied by love in the supernatural sphere. Without it everything collapsed: on the one hand, natural, personal, and social ethics degenerated into mere 'casuistry'; on the other, the spiritual withdrew from the world and adopted that disagreeable attitude of self-sufficiency and self-congratulation which, paradoxically, forced it to become more and more worldly within its domain.<sup>24</sup> This was exactly the attitude which the Spanish hierarchy and Catholic bourgeoisie epitomised to an exaggerated degree, and no reader could have failed to notice the implicit attack against the official French church and its scandalous alliance with the atheist Comtians, Maurras. The one thing they all lacked was honour. Honour moreover, as the one living proof that a point of intersection between God and man, the Church and the world, nature and grace, existed, not merely in theory but in actual fact. There could be no clearer indictment of the supernaturalist. 'There is such a thing as Christian honour', he argued. 'It is at once human and divine ... It is the mysterious fusion of human honour and the charity of Christ'.<sup>25</sup> It is, moreover, the best counterweight to the Church's 'infidelity to everything that was not herself', for Christian honour was

based on a 'temporal fidelity', and it was precisely by 'extending that fidelity from the princes of the visible realm to those of the invisible realm —the poor, the weak, the widow, the orphan, the abandoned — ... [that] our ancestors established the reality of Christian honour.'<sup>26</sup>

Nothing could be further from the conception of honour that the modern world, forever associating the notion with snobbery and anachronistic affectation, wished to divulge. It was true, of course, that the bulk of those obsessed with honour were guilty of these affectations. Modernity, it would seem, was no fertile ground for honour. 'There used to be ... the honour of one's craft, but crafts no longer exist. ... There used to be ... family honour, but if modern economic conditions do not yet condemn the poor man to celibacy, they do deprive him of the means needed to fulfil the prerogatives of family life with dignity.'<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, Bernanos was careful to remind his readers that chivalry had not been 'born out of a frenzy of optimism'. On the contrary, it 'sprouted out of the world's selfishness, savagery, and despair'; its secret was 'the overturning of the world's values: the disdain of money, the exaltation of poverty', and the subversive understanding of 'power as servant'.<sup>28</sup> 'There are no privileges, there are only services'. Indeed, 'the most evident mark of base origin is to feel naturally tempted to serve oneself to the detriment of the weak rather than to serve the weak'.<sup>29</sup>

Seen from this perspective, therefore, modernity's conspiracy against honour was not necessarily a hindrance. In fact, it could be the ripest ground for the emergence of a new spirit of chivalry. Even if it was obvious that the Church had dishonoured herself,<sup>30</sup> 'N'importe!', Bernanos insisted in his rhetorical address to Hitler:

For we thus find ourselves freer than ever to vindicate an honour whose heritage nobody disputes us. This honour is more precious to humanity than the tradition of ancient Greece. It stands a much better chance of surviving its conquerors. ... Any day now the Church will say 'No!' to your engineers and your chemists ... and then you will see how ... from our old free lands, from a renewed Christendom, there will emerge a new chivalry, ... one which will tame the polytechnic barbarism as once it tamed an earlier barbarism; a chivalry that will emerge, like the old one, from the blood shed in torrents by the martyrs.<sup>31</sup>

This notion of honour stood in stark contrast to the imposed 'duties' of modernity. It was an ethos intimately related to the spirit of childhood. For honour saw the simplicity of the truth and responded with a mere 'yes' or 'no', just like a child. Nothing could be more misleading, therefore, than to imagine Bernanos trapped in an



obsolete aristocratic aloofness. Aristocratic he certainly was.<sup>32</sup> But his was an aristocracy of the spirit. Despite (or perhaps because of) his repeated appeals to any residue of the old nobility and his clear preference for noble traditions and lifestyle, he never advocated any other foundation for a rebirth of honour than service out of love. An aristocracy of the spirit was not made out of inherited wealth or acquired knowledge. Its essence was a 'capacity to judge.'<sup>33</sup> The logic of this statement is almost geometric. For, after Thérèse of Lisieux, it was 'the spirit of childhood that would *judge* the world';<sup>34</sup> and experience had taught Bernanos that the spirit of childhood and the spirit of love 'were never to be found one without the other.'<sup>35</sup>

In his commentary on Henri Ghéon's *The Secret of the Curé d'Ars*, G. K. Chesterton remarked that 'it is of the very nature of France that the French Catholic should emphasise that the Church is a challenge. ... A Frenchman is essentially militant. ... He is not only propagandist but provocative.'<sup>36</sup> He might just as well have been writing about the author of *Les grands cimetières* and his mighty cries of indignation in the face of the crimes committed by an allegedly Catholic movement in the name of God. But this would only be half the story. For Bernanos' indignation did not stem from a sense of duty or from his loyalty to a given cause. It was above all a question of honour. And, as we have seen, it was that same sense of honour that allowed Bernanos to reach an understanding of the Church as the locus of a mysterious transaction and exchange between grace and sin grounded in anguish and suffering. As the greatest of all 'cities', it was inevitable that the Church should gather the greatest accumulation of filth. If Bernanos endeavoured to expose and attack such filth with a passion, it is only because he loved the Church with a passion. He loved her with the same love that the country priest loved poverty: 'not in the way old English ladies love lost cats. ... That is the way the rich behave. ...[but] with a deep, deliberate, and lucid love, as equal loves equal.'<sup>37</sup>

1 *Les grands cimetières sous la lune* (Paris: Plon, 1938), ii.

2 *Ibid.*, 153.

3 *Ibid.*, v.

4 *Ibid.*, 3.

5 'Starting with Bernanos', writes Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'the 'imbecile' is as fundamental a concept in Christian sociology and the 'individual' of Kierkegaard and the 'humiliated and offended' of Dostoyevsky.' *Bernanos: an Ecclesial Existence*, trans. E. Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco, Calif.: Communio-Ignatius, 1996), 358. I am heavily indebted to this book and grateful to Dr K. Flanagan for recommending it to me.

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- 6 *Les grands cimetières*, 4.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 230.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 5–6, 336.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 10 *Les Enfants humiliés* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 179.
- 11 Ortega did not use the term ‘imbecile’ as freely as Bernanos, but he was perhaps the first to point out that to be of the ‘left’ or of the ‘right’ was one of the simplest ways to become an ‘imbecile’.
- 12 *La France contre les robots* (Paris: Laffont, 1947), 181.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 205.
- 14 *Les grands cimetières*, 15 (my emphasis).
- 15 *Journal d’un curé de campagne* (Paris: Plon, 1936), 138.
- 16 *La Liberté, pourquoi faire?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), 269
- 17 *Les grands cimetières*, 267, 250, 251, 252.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 255.
- 19 *Bernanos*, 345, 347–8.
- 20 *Les grands cimetières*, 229–30.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 180–213, 214, 115.
- 22 A kind of ‘Kantian Jansenism’ in Balthasar’s apt description. See *Bernanos*, 298.
- 23 *Les grands cimetières*, 98.
- 24 On this see Balthasar, *Bernanos*, pp. 551–2.
- 25 *Les grands cimetières*, 356.
- 26 *Nous autres Français* (Paris: Gallimard, 1939), 138.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 242.
- 28 *Lettre aux Anglais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), 203–6.
- 29 *Le Chemin de la croix-des-Âmes*, June, 1940. Quoted by Balthasar, *Bernanos*, 562.
- 30 ‘It is a sad thing’, Bernanos lamented, ‘having preached about the vanity of all human greatness and humbled the pride of consecrated kings, to have to cling humbly to the hand of the first available General, even if it happens to be Franco’. *Les grands cimetières*, 357.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 357–9.
- 32 When people spoke of the ‘liberal’ or ‘democratic’ tradition, he wrote, they forgot that it expressed, ‘often unconsciously, an aristocratic conception of life’. Quoted by Balthasar, *Bernanos*, 562.
- 33 From an unpublished document; quoted in Balthasar, *Bernanos*, 119.
- 34 *Les grands cimetières*, 241 (my emphasis).
- 35 *Ibid.*, 298.
- 36 H. Ghéon, *The Secret of the Curé d’Ars* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1952 edn.), 241–7.
- 37 *Journal d’un curé de campagne*, 74