

## GEORGES BERNANOS

*Only by the recovery of the mystery of the human person, and the sense of the profundity of freedom and human destiny, can the trivialization of human existence be overcome.*

Georges Bernanos was 38 years old when his first novel, *Under the Sun of Satan*, was published in 1926. It is a remarkable novel whose power is easily felt by the English reader in the Harry Lorin Binsse translation that appeared in 1949. (An earlier less effective translation had appeared in 1940.) The prologue is a chilling portrait of evil: The Story of Mouchette.

Mouchette is a sixteen year old girl who, when the story opens is pregnant by a womanizing marquis, a fact she denies to her father, who nonetheless confronts the marquis and is laughed out of the room. That night, Mouchette sneaks out and visits the marquis, anxious to assure him that she did not tell her father. The marquis is puzzled by this. Subtly, subtly, Bernanos opens before us a girl who has chosen to be evil, not simply to act wrongly. She lies, not to save herself or the marquis or her parents, but in order to lie. The emotional mutations of this scene with the marquis move plausibly and inexorably to Mouchette's shooting the marquis.

The next set scene presents Mouchette, now three months pregnant, in a doctor's waiting room. We learn that she is now having an affair with the doctor whom she tries to convince that he is the father of her child. He dismisses this, she doesn't press it, and the scene becomes a cat and mouse game, in which the girl toys with a frantic frightened middle aged man whose wife is upstairs.

No summary can possibly convey the skill with which Bernanos creates this portrait of gratuitous evil. What is the prologue a prologue to? To a portrait of sanctity, of a young country bumpkin priest modeled on the Curé d'Ars.

Moral failure is easier to imagine and to portray than virtue or heroism. Still, many artists have given us convincing, moving, ennobling portraits of heroism. But moral failure is not evil nor is heroism sanctity. Georges Bernanos, from the outset of his literary career, had an almost unique ability to provide his reader with an unforgettable sense of the stakes of life: good or evil, heaven or hell, God or Satan.

This first novel was not a fluke, a unique achievement. *Imposture* (1928), *Joy* (1929) and *Diary of a Country Priest* (1936) continue Bernanos's amazing performance. Hoping to make some money, he tried to write a murder mystery (*A Crime*), but he could

not confine himself to the stylization of moral fault, as the genre may seem to require; inevitably, as it seems, the book was transformed into something far more, something profound, something that tapped the very wellsprings of human action.

Who was this man who in his late thirties commenced a literary career of such depth? After service in World War I, Georges Bernanos married and sold insurance in the provinces. Born in Paris, educated by the Jesuits, far right, a member of Action Francaise and indeed a royalist, he might have seemed an enthusiastic and doctrinaire young man. His war experience and then marriage tilted him in the direction of middle class respectability. Wife, family, selling insurance -- against that background, the novels surprise, even astound.

The truth is that from boyhood, Georges Bernanos's faith permeated his view of life. He was anti-democratic because he felt that modern political life trivialized the human agent, the free, intelligent person whose deeds and decisions in this life are decisive for eternity. His break with Action Francaise, his subsequent rejection of the Franco cause in Spain (*The Great Cemeteries Under the Moon*), display a man who judged politics from a religious point of view, not vice versa.

Looked upon simply as a novelist, Bernanos's work can be seen as a corrective to the banality of much modern fiction. But it is a corrective taken in the name of the importance of the subject of fiction, namely, the responsible human agent with an eternal destiny.

In 1934, aged 46, after suffering an accident that left him lame, Bernanos moved with his family to Majorca in an effort to keep down expenses, and four years later he moved to South America, Paraguay briefly, then Brazil. Thus it was from exile, that this quintessential Frenchman, whose love of his country survived his disgust with and criticism of its moral and political tone, wrote the great non-fiction polemics which, added to his fiction, make him one of the greatest of French authors.

The Spanish Civil War presented many with a crossroads. Doctrinaire leftists and fellow travelers supported the Republic unquestioningly, a certain kind of Catholic blindly supported Franco. There were noble exceptions among French -- and American -- Catholics, and none more noble than Georges Bernanos. Living in Majorca, he had close-up experience of what was at issue. The late Thirties, the Second World War, swept Bernanos into a new role as a polemicist. Combative, prophetic, angry, Bernanos spoke from the heart to his countrymen throughout the war and the agony of

occupation.

Asked by General De Gaulle, he returned to France in 1945, but he remained unclubbable. The Fourth Republic became the new target of his criticism. He was furious when it was proposed that he put himself forward for the French Academy. He avoided being honored by a society he considered corrupt, even after the crucible of its defeat and occupation.

Such a late work as *France Against the Robots*, treating the mechanization of human life, can be read today for its perceptiveness. "A world dominated by power is an abominable world, but a world dominated by number is ignoble." In a society governed by polls, where self-knowledge and self-appraisal are sought through surveys and questionnaires, we are painfully aware of the quantification and false-objectification of human existence. Bernanos did not look to politics, now become the manipulation of citizens, for the remedy of modern ills. Only by the recovery of the mystery of the human person, and the sense of the profundity of freedom and human destiny, can the trivialization of human existence be overcome. Is there any wonder that Pope John Paul II comes back again and again to the nature of the human person?

Bernanos foresaw what would happen when humans began to

see themselves as robots, as machines responsive to extrinsic causes, their actions mere reactions. Nowadays even bishops speak of the misbehavior of the clergy, for example, as corrective by means of counseling, therapy, external causes. The concept of sin, of moral responsibility, has been weakened.

Shortly before he died, in 1948, in a letter to an old friend, Bernanos closed with a remark that sums up his vision of life. "May you feel the sweet presence of Jesus Christ who makes into one reality sorrow and joy, life and death." Bernanos was incapable of an unctuous remark or of pietism. He speaks here -- he could not speak otherwise -- out of the abundance of his heart. His novels give us Catholic fiction, not as an interesting sub-genre, but as the only serious viewpoint from which the mystery of human existence can be imaginatively grasped.