16 *Journal* p 1187.
17 Yves Krumenacker, *L'école française de spiritualité: des mystiques, des fondateurs, des courants et leurs interprètes*, (Paris, 1998), p 132.
18 P Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality, Later Developments: From the Renaissance to Jansenism* (London, 1927), p329.
19 John Saward, 'Bérulle and the French School', in eds. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright and Edward Yarnold SJ, *The Study of Spirituality* (London, 1986), pp 382–96.
20 'Pierre de Bérulle', in ed Michel Dupuy, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1996), Vol. IV, p 409.
21 Bérulle, *Oeuvres*, p 413.
22 Krumenacker, *op cit.*, p 402.
23 *Diary of a Country Priest*, p 133.
24 *Journal*, p 1170.
25 *Diary of a Coutnry Priest*, p 133.
26 Albert Béguin, *Bernanos par lui-même* (Paris, 1954), p 175.

Illumination in Georges Bernanos

Richard Barrett

Given recent receptivity to the importance of aesthetics and the role of art and the imagination, an examination of an artist who managed to arrive at creative expression not in spite of faith but because of that faith will be both useful and, one hopes, inspiring.[1] Georges Bernanos was to the early part of this century what Olivier Messaien has become to the rebirth of Opera today and is the chosen subject of this study for similar reasons. Even a cursory reading of the best known novel of Bernanos, the *Diary of a Country Priest*, will initiate the reader who is otherwise ill-versed in the central preoccupations of French literature or unlettered in the complexities of Catholic spirituality, into an entirely different perspective on the function of the novel and the drama of human redemption. For in a world of peer-assessment, target-determination, performance-related pay, this story as others from the Bernanos collection can contribute to the unravelling of the activism and success-ethic that lies at the heart of our conception of what it means to achieve fulfilment and self-awareness. Fifty years after the death of Bernanos, it is not too late to set our sights on this most original of French authors for a repristination of the function of the novel and the way that the supernatural can make a contribution to that

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb07456.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

function. This is a poignant exercise given the complaint of one of this year's Booker Prize judges, that much contemporary English fiction has lost its creative edge to the tired hymns of suburbia and that much North-Atlantic fiction has been slowed by the relentless march of the grey ideologies of the contemporary academy.[2]

The contribution which Bernanos made to French literature over the period of his lifetime has been described by one biographer, Peter Hebblethwaite, as a monumental incursion into agnostic French consciousness. This was achieved not by 'trailing clouds of incense' nor shelling out the second-hand rope of much contemporary neo-Jansenism but rather through a particularly adept advocacy of the function of illumined perception as a stepping stone to faith and to a mature theism that did not reduce faith to political ideology or the stark prescriptions of a puritanesque piety but which directed the inquiring mind to the supernatural as an overarching reality. Evoking that achievement Hebblethwaite writes:

> Bernanos' originality among French novelists lies first of all in his presentation of the adventure of sanctity; but he has also learned, in the same school as his saint-heroes, compassion, a quality rare enough to make him worth investigating.[3]

This striking ability to glimpse the two aspects of the human adventure is especially visible in the work that brought him to the attention of English readers, the *Diary of a Country Priest*, which is not a manifesto for mediocrity as some have described it but a very detailed journey through the topography of the complex workings of the human psyche and the way that its deepest stirrings to transcendence can be kept in a state of Sheol-like sleep. This optic emerges within the novel but is also confirmed by Bernanos' own words:

> The truth is that my place for all time has been Mount Olivet, yes, in that instant—strangely in that very instant when he set his hand on Peter's shoulder, asking him the useless question, almost naively, yet gently and courteously 'Why are you sleeping?' [4]

The subject of the story is ostensibly a priest but it is the Countess who occupies the attention of the narrative voice, however remotely mediated. In the narrative voice of Bernanos, speaking sometimes through the priest, sometimes through others, the Countess lies in the deepest of sleeps imaginable though she is of course aware at the level of the senses of the arrival of the curé. Their encounter happens almost by chance, at her house, she trailing indifference, the incense of distracted indifference. The

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb07456.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

curé nevertheless intuits the beginnings of a greatness in her but upon further acquaintance realises she is the greatest challenge of his relatively short priestly career—to rescue someone not from the grip of some Hector but from her own inner enemy—her hardness of heart. The curé is intrigued by her coldness and discerns that it requires a solution. He realises, despite his youth, that her apparently unconquerable disdain is directed not toward his gender as whole but to the supernatural world he embodies. He quickly perceives that she is the product of some remote hurt and that she, like the Samaritan woman, sought some illumination with regard to a place of worship. The curé discerns that in her soul of stone she had been living a half-life of the tissue of self-delusion for years and thus become enmarbled into a monument of human pride. He studies her and concludes her defiance is but the outward shell of fear, the latter in greater measure to the former, that she had become the apotheosis of pride, i.e. conflated to the figurine of self-deception. She resembles those who 'live out a lie and their lying is deplorable not because it deceives others but because it *unselves* them.'[5] The curé then suddenly confronted with the enormity of his task, and much tempted to withdraw, realises that her invitations are actually confused SOS signals and that she wishes to be rescued from the elaborate, complex but by now irretrievable process of *unselving* that has overtaken her. This unselving takes on the outward form of pride and the inner form of self-loathing so that at one time she defies him to reject her as reprobate and then at another she communicates her fear of his rejection. The Countess, through a series of tentative gestures and invitations, begins to seek his company in her chateau and there to spar with him until eventually through much dexterity she opens her inner self and reveals her own hunger for personal redemption. The moment of self-awareness dawns when he confronts her elaborate web of self-deceit and she accepts the world of which he is ambassador.

The mid-nineteenth century novel was born out of a simple structure of character, narrative, crisis leading to self-awareness and thence a happy ending, sometimes corresponding to a moment of domestic redemption and sometimes not. Yet, unlike other authors (one thinks of Behn, Delarivier, Haywood, Austen and Browning), Bernanos views the *coup-de-grâce* not in terms of a carriage ride to the church on time and a set-piece of domestic bliss but as a moment when self-awareness cuts in on the central character in a definitive way. Yet this moment is not just another ineffable impression in the long tapestry of other episodes to be consigned to memory but a moment which yields a *Wendezheit*, a turning-point of such clarity that the old person, the old life, is eclipsed by something greater, yielding a new sense of identity—a moment when Olivet becomes Tabor, to use one of Bernanos' preferred biblical images. Bernanos' central

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb07456.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

preoccupation turns on a particular kind of narrative form—when someone's mistaken notion of themselves (*sa propre image trompeuse*) is shed in favour of the dawn of authenticity. Yet what is most uniquely Bernanosian is that the anatomy of such moments tends to involve an existential shift as a result of some traumatic interaction. Unlike the rather plaster-cast hagiographers of his time, Bernanos foresees such moments not as still lifes in a divine *theodramatik* but as the product of persons relating to one another. This shift takes place then not at the hands of the puritanical luddites that people his novels but as a result of the care of chosen vehicles of insight. These vehicles tend to be people who are graced by a supernatural or broadly sacramental vision of their world and their relationships. This latter term Bernanos uses in the very broad sense that is discernible in Hopkins' *God's Grandeur*, Hugo's *Les Contemplations* or Verlaine's *Delicat et non exclusif*.[6] What is particularly exciting about Bernanos' novels is the way the reader is left in suspense, the way we are dangled over not one but two and even three precipices, whereupon the central character almost fails to make the connection or seize the moment of redemption and instead chooses the easier road of escape. And thus in that other great work of Bernanos, *Sous le soleil du Satan*, the central figurine, Germaine, otherwise known as Mouchette, dreams of escape as the only way out of her contracting universe. Germaine dreams on her bed and her dreams constellate around escape to the dark world beyond the gate at the end of her garden acting like an unposted frontier on her soul:

> Far away the windows with their tiny panes were lit up one by one; the path was now no more than a vague whiteness and the ridiculous little garden suddenly grew larger and took on the dimension of night. Germaine rose as in a dream.[7]

The night then, the darkness of her dreams, the night and its very blackness, her desire for escape and adventure, and her desire for the risk thus symbolised are captured elsewhere. Here then she realises at night and in complete freedom when all about have slept her own need to escape, to set aside the small enclosures of family and domesticity as represented by the garden, more suffocating for her than the Bennett's drawing-room in *Pride and Prejudice*, more confining than the kitchen in Lawrence's *The Virgin and the Gypsy*. All the insignia of domesticity which ooze security for her peers she experiences only as benchmarks of an imprisoned self and as the shackles of a world she has outgrown. Thus it is darkness she is drawn to, because for her it evokes freedom. The sense of freedom mirrored by the night, the open window, the stars, all these invitations to flight, to yield to adventure, to the promises of risk, to love, this was the only way she could conceive of redemption:

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb07456.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Germaine knew how to love, that is to say that she nourished within her like a ripe fruit the curiosity of desire and of risk, the excited elevation of those who play with only one die, who face an unknown world and who begin again in each generation the story of the tired universe.[8]

This story then is not so much a Dido and Aeneas or a Venus and Adonis as a Helen and Paris. So Germaine is a new Helen imprisoned in her own Troy awaiting rescue. In the novel we are guided, step by step, through the first debacle that can befall the maturing soul, that is to say the problem of the soul that is frozen by self-hatred. We know that Bernanos received from Balzac the principal features of his original perspective, namely the development of character through the pressure of supernatural forces as sensible presences, either of God or of Satan. So one can verify in the mature Bernanos *une esthétique du surnaturel à l'intérieur de laquelle se deploiera le destin des personnages imaginaires.*[9] In the dramatic evolution of his characters the force of self-hatred finds its author in Satan, and contrary to the traditional iconography, hell is evoked more by the cold than by fire: Satan is the author of the cold since he introduced death into life, and it is he who divides as the separator *par excellence*, the master of indifference, and the father of lies. So the condemned are not so much burning as frozen in a state of paralysis, while the saved are those who are enkindled into life and motion. The most destructive expression of the paralysing infernal cold is hatred and when turned in on itself as self-hatred it achieves its full destructive power. So whether from the point of view of the evolution of a nation or from the point of view of the evolution of an individual, self-hatred is most damaging form of hatred. For Bernanos, in the novel *Sous le soleil du Satan*, the temptation of his period to retrieve and restore paganism, with all its attendant illusions, is really just the more desperate and deconstructed expression of the hatred of self, transposed onto a wider plain. Thus this self-hatred, which in France found an object in the traditional expressions of piety, could only lead to the eclipse not just of the soul of France itself and bringing with it all the trials of division and skepticism, but also a gathering into greatness of a debilitating cynicism toward not only religious authority but all forms of authority, be they parental, social or indeed political. For Bernanos the result would have been a wave of successive disintegrations, each obscuring the dawn of the tomorrow's hope in the blindness of today's destruction. So in the novels of Bernanos we see self-hatred itself become the *raison d'être* of the mechanisms of destruction and step by step direct its chill at all institutions, even those temporarily clothed with the veneer of contemporary appeal. In all of these features one senses not just the influence of Balzac but also the distant echo of Verlaine and the Romantics.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb07456.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

The childhood and adolescence of Bernanos was in the main solitary and often marked by dream. On the roads of Artois the boy often appeared alone, did not remain long and he spoke, it is said, at these unguarded moments with personalities of his past as if in prayer, *compagnons inconnus, vieux frêres.*[10] The young Bernanos captures the scenes and sights of his youth, his imagination is at times visual and auditory, and he is inspired not by ideas but by *persons*. His vision of the world, as gleaned from his own hand, is thus filtered or rather lightly dusted throughout his novels. So enter the problem of Bernanos' novels — whence the characters of Mouchette, Donissan, Cénabre, Chantal, the curé of Ambricourt or the wistful Hélène? Are they real persons he has known or faces he simply met on the dusty lanes of Artois? One of his early confidants was a priest, the Abbé Lagrange, curé of Crequi near Fressin and celebrant of a quality liturgy that was a world apart from the shuffling chaos at Sains. We know Bernanos had a religious turn-around at the age of sixteen or seventeen, as reflected in his letters to Lagrange, but his subsequent intellectual conversion he attributed to fine reading and intelligent guidance. And yet oddly, for one of his era and mien, he was not a *prêtre manqué*, evidently not having considered a vocation to the priesthood as a serious option, ostensibly because he thought he had another vocation, that of writer, one which excluded the former.[11] This he considered to be art's highest expression because for a mode of being consonant with creativity.[12] Yet his qualifications for such a vocation were not immediately apparent, for we know from a report of one of his teachers at his lyceum (a school he did not relish for its incessant rigour) that he was not at first sight the stuff of which writers were made but that the teacher one day suddenly registered that there was someone in the class producing exceptional written work, someone that he had passed over in silence.[13] His recipe from the moment that this other vocation began to size in his soul was relatively simple, even a tad dilettante—*faire de jolis livres pour de jolis yeux dans une jolie maison.*[14] As it turned out this was not the manifesto of a young Epicurian but a regimen of personal discipline he designed for himself in order to create as an artist. Indeed he is somewhat offended when the spiritual director directs some pious monitions at him in this regard.[15] He does beg prayers from his director though in order to see off two temptations, doubts about his own vocation and the temptations of the heart. Yet in a rather striking passage he speaks of the calling of his director in terms that can only be described as chivalric:

> All truths are sisters and you priests must be their knight-errants—after all the greatest of matters is the education of the will and of the heart—all this makes man strong and prepares him for the struggles of tomorrow. Help me to become such as you.[16]

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb07456.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

This vision renders understandable his preoccupation with a vision of his art as a mediation of Form and it is interesting that he situates his first epiphany not in a literary awakening but in a sacramental one, hence his napoleonic return to the moment of his first communion as the locus of first illumination.[17]

All this gives us a clue to the remedy Bernanos prescribes for the wound of self-hatred and which he paints in the lives of his characters. Essentially the remedy consists in self-love and this becomes the *raison d'être* of the lyceum and the university, hence his expression *aimons-nous bien—après tout la grande affaire d'education de la volonté et du coeur.*[18] His heroes are the seraphic vehicles who assist others in the education of their wills and hearts and who prepare the young for the trials of the future. In his novels, though, these figures are mysterious and at times even enigmatic to the point of estranging those they initially encounter but they are nevertheless 'priests of love' as Lawrence could never have realised the term because they live in the service of sister truth. In a letter to Abbé Lagrange on 31st May 1905 he writes:

> I have understood, thanks to them [the angels of his imagination] that we cannot value anything but through sacrifice and forgetfulness of self to the profit of God and his cause and that the better way to arrive at the conquest of death is the offering of one's life and one's death.[19]

His vision of the relationship between these figures and truth is at times exalted to a level at which they become characterised by an ardour of expression and a purity of purpose that troubles others who have taken it upon themselves to govern the central characters in the stories. The realisation of his vocation was interrupted by the First World War when he served as a cavalry officer with the VIth Dragoons but the spur of writing to his fiancée in the most difficult of conditions helped him to maintain his discipline:

> I have adopted the practice of writing to you in the evenings, at night and in the small hours, in the saddest and most inhuman of moments of the day.[20]

At times one almost senses that the girl he would eventually marry is simply a foil for his own artistic expression. The difficult conditions in which he writes, the wild oscillation between boredom and mortal danger make him appeal for letters from her.[21] As with Rupert Brooke, somewhere on the same Front, the proximity of death and the bravery of comrades dying around him brought on Bernanos a heightened sense of awareness and induced him more and more to consider his vocation should he survive the War. Unlike Brooke he could not so divinise the state of warrior that he could see in the War a great universal catharsis

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb07456.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

that in fact purified the soul and recast ordinary human beings into the bronze of the greatness of a Leonidas.[22] In some of the most poignant and potentially brilliant writing of the young Bernanos, the awful human debris of the war produced in him the repetition of a refrain that became something of a prayer when he was tempted to despair — 'I have not sinned against the light.'[23] The fact that he had recourse to this refrain against many others suggests that Bernanos really believed in the early inspirations of his youth and the function of what in Augustinian terms we would call divine illumination. He did survive the War and one senses that his survival brought about in him both a sense of gratitude and an elegant nobility of gesture, as for instance when he offered a statue of Joan of Arc to the church of Fressin in April 1925, in thanksgiving for recovery from an illness. Above all the War produced in him a sense of astonishing urgency with regard to self-expression, and in February 1925 he complains to his confidant, Robert Vallery-Rodot, about the frustrations of getting *Sous le soleil du Satan* published.[24]

So then, a reverence for mysticism certainly, inspired by Joan of Arc too, but very strangely Bernanos could show scant regard for one of the great apologists England produced at that time, Gilbert Keith Chesterton. He says of Chesterton's ingenious retelling of the life of the *poverello* of Assisi, that it suffers from too much Chesterton and not enough Francis.[25] Here though Bernanos misunderstands the importance of audience and thus fails to appreciate the contribution of Chesterton to sensitising a multi-faceted British audience to the attractions of Catholic culture and sensibility—the rank and file of his time would have had little stomach for undiluted or poorly presented medieval mysticism of a Catholic provenance. Maritain too became a correspondent of Bernanos and the two writers exchanged manuscripts for comments. Bernanos and Maritain differed in terms of style and in terms of general theory about the purpose of the novel. Yet despite common ground Bernanos demonstrates a remarkable reserve that is borne out of humility.[26] Maritain had then an influence of sorts even if it was more by way of contradistinction than by way of agreement. The correspondence between them is useful for in it Bernanos is forced to propound something of his own views when Maritain suggests his novels require a little more humanity. Bernanos then advocated a clarity of purpose in his main characters but one that was more or less viewed through the prism of their own private struggles. This clarity of vision is a particular quality of the Bernanos moment of redemption and in order to give it proper effect he maintains his characters in a state of partial blindness or confusion until the chosen moment. This is

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb07456.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

achieved though with great precision and a delicate use of the principal instrument of confusion—struggle and the primary and secondary escape mechanisms. The moment of insight—that invariably descends upon his central character like something of an airburst worthy of Giotto's *Pentecost* or Veronese's *Baptism of Christ*—is thus made all the more powerful precisely because the reader is being led in quite another direction. The problem which besets Bernanos' novels is what to do with the protagonists for good, his vehicles of illumination, once they have fulfilled their function—and so the curé from *Journal d'un curé de compagne* is left to fade in a state of decline leading to death amid a canvas of decay and desuetude with the sole consolation of having achieved his life's purpose, the bringing round of someone who, left to her own devices, almost certainly would have drifted into the frozen lakes of infernal pride. So not the happy ending of Austen's Elizabeth Bennet and Mr D'Arcy riding away from the church in an open carriage but more the quiet and realistic sense of some momentous work having been completed. This probably sounds terribly like instrumentalism to the modern reader brought up on a diet of commitment but one needs to recall the larger canvas on which Bernanos is painting—for him the chief *locus* of the transformation he is describing is always found in friendship.[27] Not for him the view of the Calvinist or the Jansenist that sees all friendship as simply potential for moral danger, he is not brought up on a diet of interrelational fear nor even its modern equivalent in gender politics; rather he views friendship as the medium through which his characters are first brought within orbit of the vehicles of illumination and thence touched directly by the light of the supernatural world.[28]

Bernanos the novelist offers us a window into the writing of the novel that can only help to lift the cloud over much of the lack of inspiration that modern critics are levelling at the contemporary novel. His preoccupation with the role of illumination and the workings of the supernatural, glimpsed now and then through the clouds of human struggle, can only help to indemnify and endow fiction with a quality of vision that is lacking for some modern critics, if not all readers. In sum, we have in Bernanos not so much a curiosity from a glorious literary past, as one finds in Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, but rather a shaft of the slenderest light from another future in an altogether different world. The orientation is ultimately supernatural and its expression sufficiently finely crafted to stand the test of time.

1 Cf. P-M. Monet, 'Jacques Maritain et la philosophie de la création artistique' in *Nova et Vetera* 3 (1997), 41–47; J. Maritain, *Art et*

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb07456.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

scholastique (Paris: Rouart, 1927); R. Barrett, 'The Priest as Artist' in *New Blackfriars* 79 (1998), 213–224; R. Weakland, 'Aesthetic and religious experience in evangelisation' in *Theology Digest* 44 (1997), 319–330.

2 For more on the latter see Liam Hudson's Tanner Lectures at Harvard shortly to be published.

3 Peter Hebblethwaite, *Bernanos—An Introduction* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1957), 23.

4 Cf. *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (Paris: 1941), 248.

5 Cf. Hebblethwaite, *Bernanos*, 39.

6 Délicat et non exclusif/Il sera du jour où nous sommes/Son coeur plutôt contemplatif/Saura pourtant l'oeuvre des hommes.' (Verlaine, *Sagesse*, III, 1.)

7 Cf. *Sous le soleil du Satan*, (Lyon:1952), 39.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Cf. Michel Estéve, *Bernanos* (Paris: Compagnie Française de Librairie, 1981), 35.

10 Cf. Jean Murray, *La Correspondance de Georges Bernanos*, Vol.I, 1904–1934, (Paris, 1971), 42.

11 Cf. *Ibid.*, 48.

12 Cf. Estève, *Bernanos*, 43–44.

13 Cf. Murray, *op cit.*, 31.

14 Cf. *Ibid.*, 50.

15 'Et pour moi, vous m'avez cru un dilettante, sans l'affection bien sincère et bien forte, sans grande foi, préoccupé d'art parce que telle est la mode et que les compliments à ce sujet flattent agréablement la vanité.' (Cf. *Ibid.*,75).

16 Cf. *Ibid.*, 91.

17 Cf. *Ibid.*, 35.

18 Letter to Abbé Lagrange, 16th May 1906, *Ibid.*, 91.

19 Cf. Ibid., 79.

20 A letter of 1st January 1916, *Ibid.*, 103.

21 A letter dated 1917, *Ibid.*, 123.

22 One thinks of Brooke's remarkable poems 'A Threnody for England' and 'A Soldier' which are but the more lyrical expressions of his own thoughts revealed in letters to Churchill before his death.

23 Bernanos, letter to Dom Besse, 13th September 1918, *Ibid.*, 153.

24 Cf. *Ibid.*, 185.

25 Bernanos, in a letter of 10th November 1925, *Ibid.*,199.

26 Bernanos, 22 April 1926, *Ibid.*, 221.

27 One would hesitate to suggest that Bernanos shared the view of the saying: 'the intellectual's problem is not vision—it's commitment!'

28 *'Je suis calmé parce qu'il me semble que 'se voir' et 's'entendre' est très doux, mais inutile, et que le mieux de toutes choses, en amitié, c'est de toujours penser un peu à l'ami.'* (Cf. Murray, *op cit.*, 92.)

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1998.tb07456.x Published online by Cambridge University Press