Introduction

No Third Way

'I swore to move you to friendship or to anger — it doesn't matter which!' *Qu'importe! Que m'importe!* So what! What does it matter to me! Oft repeated phrases in his writings, but misleading. For everything mattered to George Bernanos. Everything except whether those whom he called 'imbeciles' thought he should be more politically correct or at least more polite in the expression of his views. He had strong views on literature, people and personalities, politics, economics, religion, the Church and just about everything else. Views he expressed relentlessly and often violently in conversation and in a serious of novels and polemical writings. It is fifty years since this trenchant voice of French Catholic culture resounded for the last time. He died on the 5th of July 1948. Some may ask: *que m'importe*?

Bernanos will be best known in the English-speaking world for his novel, *The Diary of a Country Priest.* The *Diary* is his finest fictional work and was his favourite. But Bernanos escapes easy classification. Besides being a novelist, he was a journalist, essayist and dramatist. His entire oeuvre would be an archetype of what is commonly referred to as the literature of commitment. He and his works, he liked to believe, were one and the same — there was no attempt to hide behind a narrative voice! That omni-presence of Bernanos in his writings is what foremost moves to friendship or anger. Denouncing the rich, defending the poor, upbraiding the Church hierarchy might well make him many friends today. His conviction, however, that Satan is real, that human beings are sinners, that democracy is a charade for self-interest, that the spirit of modernity cannot but be atheistic and without honour would rouse not a few others to anger. So what? So long as you are stirred out of what his diary-writing country priest observed to be the *ennui* devouring this world.

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Bernanos lived through one of the most turbulent periods of world history. The beginning of this century offered grandiose expectations for human salvation: a lasting peace, economic prosperity, political liberty, scientific progress. No less grandiose disappointments followed: near incessant wars, the retrenchment of the most ugly poverty, murderous ideological battles, the risk of human enslavement to or annihilation by technology. One might think that people in such an age of change had more than enough happening around them to move them — to friendship or anger. Bernanos perceived rather the onset of a numbed indifference in the face of a new world in which God would be absent and the human conscience sombred in resignation. In his famous *Letter to the English*, written during the Second World War, Bernanos wrote: 'it's not the intelligence of people that is sick; it's their consciences.' That might be one antidote to our postmodern preoccupation with theories, etymologies and genealogies of morality. What went wrong? Where did virtue, honour, truth and holiness founder? Where they always do: not so much in theory as in human lives. Bernanos was looking not for systematic solutions but for saints and heroes.

Extremism can seem so un-English, so un-Englishly Catholic. It is not just the fashion of the moment to talk of a Third Way in politics, religion or morality. But such an idea would have set Bernanos off into another violent tirade. A Third Way would have sounded to him like a soft option. What could there be between friendship and anger but indifference? Friendship with God is the end of Christian hope. It already becomes a reality for us when we are in friendship with our neighbour. Anger is what our neighbour feels when his or her hope is betrayed or what we feel when our conscience is ill at ease by our role in that betrayal. Better thus to be moved to one or the other than to be left indifferent. *Ennui* is devouring us when we act as if God and our neighbour do not matter. Bernanos still matters if that Third Way in this world is no moral option.

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