

2014

## Interiority in Some Novels by François Mauriac and Georges Bernanos

Eamon Maher

*Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie*

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### Recommended Citation

Maher, E. "Interiority in Some Novels by François Mauriac and Georges Bernanos", Book chapter in "A l'école de la Vie Intérieure Approches Interdisciplinaires". J. Lambert and A. Lerousseau (eds) Fernelmont : EME, 2014.

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**Esthétique et Spiritualité  
III  
À l'école de la vie intérieure  
Approches interdisciplinaires**

sous la direction de  
**Jérémy Lambert  
Andrée Lerousseau**

**EME**

« Esthétique et Spiritualité »  
Collection dirigée par Baudouin Decharneux,  
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Ouvrage publié avec le soutien du Centre d'Études en Civilisations, Langues et Littératures étrangères (CECILLE – Lille 3), du Centre de Recherche sur l'Imaginaire (CRI – U.C.L.) et de l'École doctorale SHS — Lille – Nord de France.



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# ESTHÉTIQUE ET SPIRITUALITÉ

## III

### À L'ÉCOLE DE LA VIE INTÉRIEURE

#### APPROCHES INTERDISCIPLINAIRES

Sous la direction de  
Jérémy LAMBERT et Andrée LEROUSSEAU

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# Interiority in Some Novels

## by François Mauriac and Georges Bernanos

Eamon MAHER

Institute of Technology Tallaght (Dublin)

For all that François Mauriac and Georges Bernanos are synonymous with the 'Roman Catholic' in France, were born within three years of one another, Mauriac in 1885 and Bernanos in 1888, progressed seamlessly from fiction to political journalism and attached great importance to their Catholic faith, most commentators do not mark them down as kindred spirits. Certainly, they displayed starkly different attitudes to issues like sin and grace, sexuality, politics. They also had vastly different literary styles, Mauriac's being precise and classical, Bernanos' more declamatory and rhetorical. Bernanos predeceased Mauriac by twenty-two years, passing away in 1948, a short time after returning to France from Brazil at the request of General de Gaulle, a man who demonstrated huge respect for the two writers. André Séailles notes how Bernanos always demonstrated a rebellious personality that preventing him from accepting the literary and worldly honours that were offered to him:

Il est l'homme qui a tout refusé, la sécurité, la carrière brillante qui s'offrait à lui après le succès fulgurant de *Sous le Soleil de Satan* (1926) : il a refusé les consécrations, l'Académie Française que lui proposait Mauriac au nom de la Compagnie, la Légion d'honneur que lui avait accordée le Général de Gaulle... Il s'est dressé face à une société fondée comme toutes les sociétés humaines, sur l'injustice et sur le mal et il a refusé de pactiser avec le monde.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> André SÉAILLES, "Mauriac et Bernanos", dans *Cahiers François Mauriac*, n° 4, 1976, p. 222.



Mauriac, on the other hand, was never shied away from awards; in fact, during his lifetime he got virtually every accolade a writer could wish for, including the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1952 and the Légion d'honneur in 1958. However, it is not the various honours bestowed on the writers that I want to explore in this paper. Rather, it is the manner in which they set about capturing the intense interior moments that take hold of their characters and what the consequences of such upheavals are. The first point that is worth making in this regard is that Mauriac's writings are characterised by a deft probing of the psychological make-up of his characters, many of whom are given over to evil. With Bernanos, the emphasis is more on the spectacular and the supernatural, the times when sin or grace take hold of a person's soul. Bernanos believed, in fact, that God and Satan were vying for people's souls and that wrong decisions could have drastic consequences for his characters. Mauriac, influenced no doubt by the Jansenism imbued in him by an overly zealous mother, was marked by scrupulosity and doubt, and was particularly wary of the dangers associated with the flesh. It is normal for his characters to associate sexuality with sin and in this regard there is a genuine divergence from Bernanos' theology, as is pointed out by Monique Gosselin:

Bernanos sait que la sexualité n'est qu'une expression du besoin de communication entre les êtres, elle est simple passage. Ce qui l'intéresse, c'est la communication même entre les êtres : attitude de mystique, non de psychologue ou de psychiatre.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to their respective positions with regard to sexuality, there is another fundamental difference between the two writers in their approach to free will. Mauriac's characters are generally passive; they let destiny decide their fate for them. They rarely if ever actually 'choose' good or evil; rather, these are imposed on them by a transcendent force. On the other hand, Bernanos' characters assume their destiny, take responsibility for their actions. They are constantly aware of the supernatural forces that surround them and recognise that they are active participants in determining their spiritual fate. As Gosselin pointed out, we are talking about the difference between the position adopted by a psychiatrist and a mystic. In his Préface to the Pléiade edition of Bernanos' novels, Gaëtan Picon observes: "*Il ne pouvait être*

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<sup>2</sup> Monique GOSSELIN, "Confrontation de deux univers romanesques : Bernanos et Mauriac", dans *Études bernanosiennes*, n° 11, *La revue des Lettres modernes*, p. 147.



que prêtre ou romancier, celui pour qui l'âme du prochain est sinon Dieu, du moins la médiation par laquelle Dieu se manifeste.”<sup>3</sup> Mauriac was also passionately interested in souls, but he was mostly incapable of envisaging a means to guide his characters to the safe haven of grace. His God was a rather severe, aloof entity that did not intervene in the lives of people. Certain aspects of Mauriac’s personal life, especially the homoerotic longings that were brought into the open by the two tomes of Jean-Luc Barré’s fascinating biography, published in 2009 and 2010 respectively<sup>4</sup>, assist us in understanding the amount of his personal anguish that can be detected in Mauriac’s fiction. We read the following admission in *Commencements d'une vie*, for example: “Seule, la fiction ne ment pas, elle entrouvre sur la vie d'un homme une porte dérobée par où se glisse, en dehors de tout contrôle, son âme inconnue.”<sup>5</sup>

### *Thérèse Desqueyroux* and the elusive God

A brief discussion of a couple of Mauriac’s novels will now seek to outline the interior ‘trajectoire’ of some of his main characters. We will begin with the heroine of what is possibly his best novel, *Thérèse Desqueyroux* (1927). In the fashion regularly employed by the writer, Mauriac produced a *premier jet* for *Thérèse* that shows considerable evolution from the initial draft to the actual novel. The original title, *Conscience, instinct divin*, underlines that novelist’s intention was to examine in detail the spiritual dilemma of his heroine. Whereas in the later version *Thérèse* is portrayed as being sceptical of religious belief, especially as that was manifested in the hypocritical behaviour of her husband Bernard and his family, in *Conscience* she gets to confess her sins to a priest. Thus Mauriac’s *note liminaire* to *Conscience* explains that *Thérèse* was “une chrétienne dont la confession écrite eût été adressée à un prêtre.”<sup>6</sup> The first person narrative was a means of underlining the confessional nature of this original project and does not feature in the later novel. Equally revealing in *Conscience* is *Thérèse*’s erotic fantasies about a young man she had known and whom she describes as this “*Hippolyte mal*

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<sup>3</sup> Dans François MAURIAC, *Œuvres romanesques* suivi de *Dialogue des Carmélites*, Paris, Gallimard, « Bibliothèque de la Pléiade », 1961, p. XII.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Luc BARRÉ, *François Mauriac. Biographie intime*, 2 t., Paris, Fayard, 2009 et 2010.

<sup>5</sup> François MAURIAC, *Commencements d'une vie*, dans *Œuvres autobiographiques*, Paris, Gallimard, « Bibliothèque de la Pléiade », 1990, p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> ID., *Conscience, instinct divin*, dans *Œuvres romanesques et théâtrales complètes. T. II*, Paris, Gallimard, « Bibliothèque de la Pléiade », 1979, p. 3.

*léché*<sup>7</sup> who is transformed suddenly into a “*bête cruelle qui avait besoin des ténèbres*”.<sup>8</sup> Sexuality is presented in both fictional representations as being problematic, an obstacle to realising a fulfilling relationship with God. A knowledge of *Conscience* is essential to gain a full understanding of what emerged later in *Thérèse Desqueyroux*.

In the Préface to *Thérèse*, Mauriac wrote: “*Beaucoup s'étonneront que j'ai pu imaginer une créature plus odieuse encore que tous mes autres héros. Saurai-je jamais rien dire des êtres ruisselants de vertu et qui ont le cœur sur la main ? Les 'cœurs sur la main' n'ont pas d'histoire ; mais je connais celle des cœurs enfouis et tout mêlés à un corps de boue.*”<sup>9</sup> If such a declaration was not bad enough from an author who came from ‘*le clan catholique*’, Mauriac went further by expressing his desire to bring this ‘*âme égarée*’ to God. This was not what the ‘*public bienpensant*’ expected from one of their own. From the beginning of the novel, in effect, there is an obvious connivance between Mauriac and his heroine. In some ways she could be seen as capturing her creator’s own dilemma at the time he was composing the novel — Le Barré recounts that the attraction Mauriac felt for the Swiss cultural attaché Bernard Barbey was at its height in the latter half of the 1920s, with all the strain this inevitably placed on Mauriac’s marriage and his Catholic faith.

Thérèse Desqueyroux attempts to poison her husband for reasons that are not wholly clear. She certainly feels ensnared in the cage of family, a sentiment that is reinforced when she becomes pregnant and Bernard’s people view her with a heightened respect as “*le réceptacle de leur progéniture*”. The physical side of their relationship is also a problem: “*Tout ce qui précède mon mariage prend dans mon souvenir cet aspect de pureté ; contraste, sans doute, avec cette ineffaçable salissure des noces.*”<sup>10</sup> Part of the problem lies with her husband’s total insensitivity to her needs: “*Il était enfermé dans son plaisir comme ces jeunes porcs [...] lorsqu'ils reniflent le bonheur dans une auge (c'était moi, l'auge, songe Thérèse).*”<sup>11</sup>

Marriage legalises such disgusting behaviour and the Catholic Church gives its blessing for couples to engage in these practices. Thérèse yearns for a spiritual adventure, for a relationship that might open up the possibility of inner knowledge, or genuine exchange

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<sup>7</sup> *Id.*, *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, dans *Œuvres romanesques et théâtrales complètes. T. II, op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> *Idem*, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> *Idem*, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> *Idem*, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> *Idem*, p. 38.

between a man and a woman. It may well be her discussions with Jean Azévédo, considered an unsuitable suitor for Anne de la Trave, Bernard's half-sister, that reveals the aridity of her life to Thérèse: "*il disait qu'il avait longtemps cru que rien n'importait hors la recherche, la poursuite de Dieu.*"<sup>12</sup> Heavily pregnant, she is flattered at how an intelligent man shows interest in her ideas, listens to them, discusses them with her. He admits that he could never have this type of exchange with Anne and that for him their relationship is little more than a dalliance. He senses something deeper in Thérèse: "*Mais vous ! Je sens dans toutes vos paroles une faim et une soif de sincérité.*"<sup>13</sup> Without knowing it, he has touched on the nub of Thérèse's dilemma. She values the truth above all else and feels disgusted by all that passes for religious practice in the people with whom she shares her life. Thus she becomes fascinated by the young priest in their parish, who is dismissed by most of his parishioners, one of whom remarks: "*mais il manque d'onction, je ne le trouve pas ce qu'on appelle pieux.*"<sup>14</sup> However, during a *Corpus Christi* procession Thérèse cannot help noticing the contrast between the priest and her husband:

Thérèse dévisagea le curé, qui avançait les yeux presque fermés, portant des deux mains cette chose étrange. [...] Et tout de suite, derrière lui, Bernard "qui accomplissait son devoir".<sup>15</sup>

It is shortly after this episode that the attempted poisoning of Bernard begins. It is almost as though, having had her existence poisoned by her husband and his family, the heroine feels it is justified to strike back in similar fashion. No longer able to endure "*la mort dans la vie*", she embarks on a course of action that almost has fatal consequences. After her trial, where her husband's testimony is largely responsible for her acquittal, Thérèse imagines the 'confession' she will make to Bernard when she will rejoin him at her aunt's residence, Argelouse. Soon after they meet, however, it becomes clear that no such healing can ever take place. Bernard tells her that she will stay in Argelouse and that they will maintain the appearances of being a devoted couple. She will have no contact with her daughter and other family members, apart from when her absence would lead to people

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<sup>12</sup> *Idem*, p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> *Idem*, p. 62.

<sup>14</sup> *Idem*, p. 68.

<sup>15</sup> *Idem*, p. 70.

talking. Her future will be grim, with only the surrounding pine trees as witnesses to "*cet étouffement lent.*"<sup>16</sup>

That evening, after the depressing exchange with Bernard, Thérèse contemplates putting an end to her life. Not nearly as much a heretic as is commonly believed, Mauriac's heroine turns to God in her hour of need and issues the following challenge: "*S'Il existe, cet Être (et elle revoit, en un bref instant, la Fête-Dieu accablante, l'homme solitaire écrasé sous une chape d'or, et cette chose qu'il porte des mains, et ces lèvres qui remuent, et cet air de douleur) qu'Il détourne la main criminelle avant que ce ne soit trop tard.*"<sup>17</sup> As though in answer to her call, Thérèse hears movements in the house and a member of the domestic staff enters her room to announce the death of Aunt Clara. Although referred to as '*la vieille impie*', Clara is the only person to have ever loved Thérèse unconditionally, a fact that brings to mind the concept of the mystical substitution of souls: Clara dies so that her niece might live.

This scene reveals a lot about Thérèse's inner life. She is not interested in social standing or appearances, but in attaining a deeper understanding of God's presence in the world. Hence, when Bernard finally allows her to leave Argelouse and go to live in Paris and asks her towards why she did what she did, Thérèse believes that she might finally be able to give the confession she has been preparing for years: "*elle imaginait un retour au pays secret et triste, toute une vie de méditation, de perfectionnement, dans le silence d'Argelouse : l'aventure intérieure, la recherche de Dieu...*"<sup>18</sup> This is the type of life she would like to lead, a life of the spirit, a life of interiority, a life in which God would play a central role. But the dream vanishes when her husband fails completely to understand her explanation. The forgiveness she sought is not granted and she is left alone on a Parisian street with the thought that she is now at least free of the shackles of family, if not of the longing for a Being she has searched for in vain throughout her life. Mauriac could never quite break free of his character and came back to Thérèse in two subsequent novels where once more she resisted his attempts to bring about her conversion.

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<sup>16</sup> *Idem*, p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> *Idem*, p. 84.

<sup>18</sup> *Idem*, pp. 101 & 102.

## The novel of Conversion – *Le Nœud de vipères*

It was only in 1932, with the publication of *Le Nœud de vipères*, that Mauriac finally managed to write a novel of conversion. The choice of the anticlerical Louis, an embittered, wealthy lawyer, as the main character was in no way coincidental. At the age of sixty-eight, and in poor health, Louis is preparing his last ‘case’, a diary in which he enumerates all his grievances against his wife Isa and their covetous children, who are eagerly awaiting his death so that they can get their hands on his money. The source of his antipathy towards his wife stems from her fatal admission during their honeymoon that she had been in love with another man that her family had considered unsuitable, before she met Louis. Prior to this revelation, Louis had been overjoyed that a woman should find him attractive and this joy had led him to envisage the possibility of a divine presence in the world: “*J’eus soudain la sensation aiguë, la certitude presque physique qu’il existait un autre monde, une réalité dont nous ne connaissions que l’ombre...*”<sup>19</sup> With Isa’s admission of her prior attachment, the importance of which he exaggerates in his mind, Louis immersed himself in work and cut himself off emotionally from any romantic pretensions of being loved. He writes in the diary which he imagines Isa reading after his death: “*Le trait dominant de ma nature et qui aurait frappé toute autre femme que toi, c’est une lucidité affreuse.*”<sup>20</sup>

Being lucid in a court of law is one thing, understanding the intimate machinations of the female mind quite another. Like Thérèse, Louis is someone who in different circumstances might easily have been an exemplary Christian. In an attempt to annoy his pious wife, he regularly pointed out flaws in her belief system. How could someone who claimed to believe in the Gospel message of love be so calculating when it came to her dealings with servants or local shopkeepers, he asked her occasionally? Louis chose to stay away from all religious ceremonies, ate meat on a Friday in spite of the Church ban, uttered heretical statements, all with a view to undermining his wife’s faith. He explains his motivation in one diary entry: “*Vos adversaires se font en secret de la religion une idée beaucoup plus haute que vous ne l’imaginez et qu’ils ne le croient eux-mêmes. Sans cela, pourquoi seraient-ils blessés de ce que vous la pratiquez*

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<sup>19</sup> ID., *Le Nœud de vipères*, dans *Œuvres romanesques et théâtrales complètes. T. II, op. cit.*, p. 404.

<sup>20</sup> *Idem*, p. 388.

*bassement* ?”<sup>21</sup> This contrast comes home to him forcibly during the illness and death of their daughter Marie. Louis genuinely loved this girl and felt huge sadness when she fell ill and cried out while in the throes of a fever: “*Pour papa ! pour papa !*”<sup>22</sup> Once more, we have here an example of the substitution of souls, a theology that is prevalent also in Bernanos’ work. Marie is suffering ‘for’ her father, her death is an attempt to bring him back to life. Indeed, after her passing, Louis is the one who feels no real attachment to the corpse, believing, in the best Christian tradition, that the child’s spirit or soul is already elsewhere. He points out how different his reaction is to that of his wife:

Tu ne pensais qu’à cette chair de ta chair qui allait être ensevelie et qui était au moment de pourrir ; tandis que moi, l’incrédule, j’éprouvais devant ce qui restait de Marie, tout ce que signifie le mot “dépouille”. J’avais le sentiment irrésistible d’un départ, d’une absence. Elle n’était plus là ; ce n’était plus elle.<sup>23</sup>

Mauriac’s description of Louis’ painful path to peace is skilful. He doesn’t have recourse to any miraculous revelations or significant encounters with a divine presence in order to show Louis the error of his ways. What we have instead is a slow unravelling of the mystery of life, the pain caused by poor communication between people. Shortly before heading to Paris to meet with his bastard son, Robert, to whom he intends to bequeath much of his wealth, Louis has a revealing exchange with Isa who implores him not to go. To his comment that all she ever cared about were the children, she replies: “*Mes enfants ! quand je pense qu’à partir du moment où nous avons fait chambre à part, je me suis privée, pendant des années, d’en avoir aucun avec moi, la nuit, même quand ils étaient malades, parce que j’attendais, j’espérais toujours ta venue.*”<sup>24</sup> The children, although aware of their father’s whereabouts in Paris (they have been in touch with Robert) fail to contact him, which means he never gets to see his wife alive again. Fragments of letters she burnt on the eve of her death reveal that she had been in love with him throughout their marriage, that his philandering had hurt her deeply and that she had been in touch with her confessor about their problems. With his wife’s passing, Louis’ blind desire for vengeance disappears. He gives all his possessions to his children and prepares for his imminent death. He

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<sup>21</sup> *Idem*, p. 413.

<sup>22</sup> *Idem*, p. 447.

<sup>23</sup> *Idem*, p. 448.

<sup>24</sup> *Idem*, p. 477.

still employs the diary to record how he is feeling, but he knows that his children will be incapable of understanding its contents after his death. The futility of his life comes into sharp focus:

Comme un chien aboie à la lune, j'ai été attiré par un reflet. Se réveiller à soixante-huit ans. Renaître au moment de mourir ! Qu'il me soit donné quelques années encore, quelques mois, quelques semaines...<sup>25</sup>

*Le Nœud de vipères* provides a good insight into the strange workings of grace. Louis, the sceptical rationalist, the incredulous observer of his wife's pious acts, her painstaking religious scruples, ends up seeing how he was a lot closer to God than he realised. It is obvious towards the end of the novel that he has attained some degree of peace: "*La pensée de ma triste vie ne m'accablait pas. Je ne sentais pas le poids de ces années désertes [...] comme si je n'eusse pas été un vieillard très malade, comme si j'avais eu encore devant moi, toute une existence, comme si cette paix qui me possédait eût été quelqu'un.*"<sup>26</sup> The last words in his diary indicate a reconciliation with God, the same God with whom he struggled throughout his life. His grand-daughter Janine suspects that Louis was someone who took religion far more seriously than any of them could have guessed: "*mais ce fut notre malheur à tous qu'il nous ait pris pour des chrétiens exemplaires.*" And she adds: "*Me comprenez-vous si je vous affirme que là où était son trésor, là n'était pas son cœur ?*"<sup>27</sup> This is the farthest Mauriac went in affirming how certain souls can be saved by the intervention of grace. There is an optimism about the ending of this novel in particular that is different from the normal rectitude that characterises his presentation of such concepts. The throat cancer which he contracted around this time and the loving care of his family lavished on him clearly contributed to the change in his approach. The diary form was also a way of sharing with readers Louis' interior journey.

### *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne*

Mention of the diary form provides a logical link to a consideration of Bernanos' most famous novel, *Journal d'un curé de campagne*. Published in 1936, it established Bernanos' reputation as a writer with a keen understanding of the inner life of priests — the latter feature in all his best-known works, the notable exception being the *Nouvelle histoire de*

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<sup>25</sup> *Idem*, p. 509.

<sup>26</sup> *Idem*, p. 522.

<sup>27</sup> *Idem*, p. 532.



*Mouchette*, which we will discuss in due course. *Journal* recounts a humble priest's grim experience of working in a largely dechristianised parish in northern France. Viewed as something of a failure by his superiors, parishioners and the local aristocracy, the young curé d'Ambricourt nevertheless goes about his work with courage and perseverance. He knows that the parish is "*dévorée par l'ennui?*" and surmises prophetically: "*Quelque jour peut-être la contagion nous gagnera, nous découvrirons en nous ce cancer.*"<sup>28</sup> When later in the novel, the curé is actually diagnosed with stomach cancer, readers have the impression that he has taken the 'ennui' at the heart of his parish onto himself:

Mais je me demande si les hommes ont jamais connu cette contagion de l'ennui, cette lèpre? Un désespoir avorté, une forme turpide du désespoir, qui est sans doute comme la fermentation d'un christianisme décomposé.<sup>29</sup>

Bernanos is successful at building up a picture of how the curé reacts to the various obstacles he encounters on what is essentially a climb to the top of Golgotha. As his health deteriorates, he battles on with the problems in his parish, visiting houses where he is not really welcome, liaising with the local Comte and Comtesse in an attempt to enlist their support for various ventures, working with the First Communion class, which reveals a lack of innocence that is disturbing in ones so young. He is acutely aware of his inadequacies as an administrator and counts only one real friend among his clerical confreres, le curé de Torcy, who is as efficient in running his parish as Ambricourt is inept in his. Yet the older man sees that Ambricourt possesses a strong inner life: "*Je te traite de va-nu-pieds, m'a-t-il dit, mais je t'estime. Prends le mot pour ce qu'il vaut, c'est un grand mot. À mon sens, le bon Dieu t'a appelé, pas de doute.*"<sup>30</sup> Such an endorsement gives reassurance to the younger man, who will need all the help he can find for the challenges that lie ahead. Chantal, the daughter of the Comte and Comtesse, tells him that her father has been conducting an affair with the governess: "*Je les ai entendus cette nuit. J'étais juste sous leur fenêtre, dans le parc. Ils ne prennent même plus la peine de fermer les rideaux.*"<sup>31</sup> Chantal is a young girl in despair at the indifference of her mother to what is

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<sup>28</sup> Georges BERNANOS, *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, dans *Œuvres romanesques suivi de Dialogues des Carmélites*, op. cit., p. 1031.

<sup>29</sup> *Idem*, p. 1032.

<sup>30</sup> *Idem*, p. 1077.

<sup>31</sup> *Idem*, p. 1134.

happening. After the tragic death of her son years previously, she has withdrawn from the world and her family as she awaits the time when she can rejoin him in heaven.

The curé feels obliged to pay a visit to the château. Although he feels completely ill at ease with the worldly comtesse, he soon finds the strength to tell her that her hard heart is placing in danger any possible reunion with her son. By neglecting Chantal and her husband, she is putting her soul at risk. Unaware of where the words he utters are coming from, he states: “*l'enfer, c'est de ne plus aimer.*”<sup>32</sup> Shocked by his insolence, and yet aware that he possesses an uncanny ability to read her soul, the comtesse eventually comes round to his way of thinking. The priest is aware of the bizarre effect he sometimes has on people: “*J'ai, depuis quelque temps, l'impression que ma seule présence fait sortir le péché de son repaire, l'amène comme à la surface de l'être, dans les yeux, la bouche, la voix... On dirait que l'ennemi dédaigne de rester caché devant un si chétif adversaire, vient me défier en face, se rit de moi.*”<sup>33</sup> The comtesse had lived for years thinking that she was leading an exemplary life, tending to her religious duties and behaving as a good Christian should do. But what she didn't realise was that her heart was hardened against God for taking her son. In the course of their dramatic exchange, Ambricourt gets her to see the light and to say the ‘Our Father’, emphasising in particular the words “*Que votre volonté soit faite.*”<sup>34</sup> Later that evening, the priest receives a note from the château, thanking him for the peace he has brought the comtesse: “*Que vous dire ? Le souvenir désespéré d'un petit enfant me tenait éloignée de tout, dans une solitude, et il me semble qu'un autre enfant m'a tirée de cette solitude.*”<sup>35</sup> The curé can only marvel at how he brings calm to another while being in such spiritual turmoil himself.

It is the spirit of prayer that sustains the priest throughout his ministry. His violent stomach pains confine him to a diet of bread dipped in wine, obvious symbols of the Eucharist, and this, allied to his sickly and untidy appearance, fan false rumours of his alcoholism in the parish. One evening, he vomits up blood and is found by a girl from his catechism class, who cleans him and apologises for her behaviour in class. Various incidents in his life mirror the Stations of the Cross. He stumbles on a number of occasions and gets up again; he is unable to

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<sup>32</sup> *Idem*, p. 1163.

<sup>33</sup> *Idem*, p. 1149.

<sup>34</sup> *Idem*, p. 1163.

<sup>35</sup> *Idem*, p. 1165.

sleep; feels abandoned by God and his friends, inadequate to the obstacles that cross his path. In the end he concludes: “*J’étais prisonnier de la Sainte Agonie.*”<sup>36</sup> He ends up in Lille where he discovers the full extent of his terminal illness. He reproaches himself for his initial reaction of panic: “*Que Dieu me pardonne ! Je ne songeais pas à Lui.*”<sup>37</sup> In spite of all the confusion in his life, Ambricourt did not want to leave this world. He goes to visit a former friend from the seminary, Louis Dufréty, who is living with a woman who is unwilling to marry him in case he wants to return to the priesthood, and dies in their apartment. The last words he utters are: “*Qu’est-ce que cela fait ? Tout est grâce*”<sup>38</sup>, which summarise the priest’s Christian witness and mirror his creator’s own convictions.

### Interiority in *Nouvelle histoire de Mouchette*

One encounters a very different type of interiority in Bernanos’ next published novel, *Nouvelle histoire de Mouchette* (1937). More a long ‘*nouvelle*’ than a novel, it paints a gruesome picture of the fate of an adolescent girl from an impoverished background who falls prey to the lascivious attentions of an epileptic poacher called Arsène. Mouchette is raped by this man and then returns to her home to witness the death of her mother, in whom she had unsuccessfully tried to confide her secret. Any interiority this young girl has is attained through dreams: “*S’il lui arrive de s’échapper souvent d’elle-même, grâce au rêve, elle a perdu depuis longtemps le secret de ces routes mystérieuses par lesquelles on rentre en soi.*”<sup>39</sup> When thinking back on what happened to her with Arsène, Mouchette comes to believe that it may all have been ‘un rêve’. However, the marks spotted on her body by ‘la vieille Derain’ would indicate otherwise: “*La chemise de Mouchette s’est ouverte, découvre sa poitrine, et les meurtrissures y apparaissent nettement. Elles n’ont pas eu le temps de tourner au violet.*”<sup>40</sup>

The use of dream-like sequences by Bernanos is an attempt to suggest that at times a heightened level of consciousness can be achieved by characters without their being aware of it. At times, it can be difficult, indeed, well-nigh impossible, to differentiate between dream and reality in some of Bernanos’ later novels. Mouchette’s

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<sup>36</sup> *Idem*, p. 1187.

<sup>37</sup> *Idem*, p.1 240.

<sup>38</sup> *Idem*, p. 1259.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.*, *Nouvelle histoire de Mouchette*, dans *Œuvres romanesques*, *op. cit.*, p. 1282.

<sup>40</sup> *Idem*, p. 1319.

material world is so filled with hunger, violence, alcoholism and decadence that transcendence is obscured, almost obliterated. As she contemplates the muddy water of the pool in which she will end her life, one has the impression that she is still in a dream, but one that is not nightmarish in this instance: “*La pensée de la mort n’achevait pourtant pas de se former, le regard qu’elle fixait malgré elle sur la mare qui miroitait sur ses pieds restait vague.*”<sup>41</sup> More than a suicide, Bernanos presents Mouchette’s death in terms of a slide into eternity, an eternity where she may finally experience joy. The Church has completely lost its grip on the local population, although some vestiges of former times prevail: “*L’heure qui précède la grand-messe est, comme jadis, une heure de recueillement. Il faut des siècles pour changer le rythme de la vie dans un village français. Les gens se préparent’, dit-on, pour expliquer la solitude de la grande rue, son silence. Se préparer à quoi ? Car personne ne va plus à la grand-messe. N’importe.*”<sup>42</sup> In such an environment, there is no-one to whom Mouchette can turn for solace. No saintly priest, no caring lover, no family members, no friends. In such a context, there is an air of inevitability about the girl’s fate, a fate that is not, however, devoid of hope, as the last lines of the novel illustrate:

L’eau insidieuse glissa le long de sa nuque, remplit ses oreilles d’un joyeux murmure de fête. Et, pivotant doucement sur les reins, elle crut sentir la vie se dérober sous elle tandis que montait à ses narines l’odeur même de la tombe.<sup>43</sup>

Bernanos gives readers a glimpse of the transcendent in the most unlikely circumstances. On reading the lines above, one senses that Mouchette is enveloped by the water in a type of symbolic baptism that removes the dirt and grime of her miserable existence. There is hope in evidence as to her ultimate fate, as her suffering has been great. The interiority in this instance, closely linked to the surreal, has a quality that is unique to Bernanos. Anne M. Begley offers this assessment of his literary vision:

Like Dostoyevsky, to whom he has been regularly compared, he [Bernanos] depicts the spiritual heights and depths of man, breathing into his characters, whether saint or sinner, an inner life that bears witness to the mysterious and hidden workings of grace.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Idem*, p. 1342.

<sup>42</sup> *Idem*, pp. 1326 et 27.

<sup>43</sup> *Idem*, p. 1345.

<sup>44</sup> Ann M. BEGLEY, “Georges Bernanos’ Love Affair with God”, in *Religion and Literature*, vol. 33, 2001/3, p. 38.

Mauriac noted that Bernanos went further than any writer of fiction in the exploration of the nature of evil — not sin, which Mauriac himself specialised in. In novel after novel, we encounter the image of the death and passion of Christ being re-enacted by priests and lay men and women, which endows his fictional saints with a mystical dimension that is very different from the psychological exploration of evil at which Mauriac was so adept. Louis' conversion at the end of *Le Nœud de vipères* is unusual, as his creator was someone marked by Jansenism as his biographer Barré remarks:

Élevé dans l'idée toute janséniste d'un Dieu implacable, auquel tout homme doit se soumettre sans débat pour expier sa faute originelle, l'enfant vit dès son plus jeune âge dans la hantise d'offenser ou contrarier ce juge à la fois inaccessible et omniprésent.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

Mauriac's God was a daunting, fearful presence of whom the young boy, and later, the writer, was wary. There was the additional issue of the danger of self-revelation that he raised in *Dieu et Mammon* where he wrote: "Écrire, c'est se livrer."<sup>46</sup> He had good reason not to reveal certain aspects of his nature, as we now know. Bernanos, on the other hand, had a more vigorous inner life and did not suffer from the same fears that haunted Mauriac. Their interior journey was very different, certainly, but there are nonetheless certain similarities that break through their fiction at various times, especially in relation to Louis' path to God in *Le Nœud de vipères*, that make a comparative study such as this worthwhile.

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<sup>45</sup> Jean-Luc BARRÉ, *François Mauriac. Biographie intime. T. I. 1885-1940, op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>46</sup> François MAURIAU, *Dieu et Mammon*, dans *Œuvres romanesques et théâtrales complètes. T. II, op. cit.*, p. 777.

## Table des matières

### Avant-propos

Jérémy LAMBERT et Andrée LEROUSSEAU ..... 5

### Introduction

Claude LOUIS-COMBET

L'écriture de l'intériorité..... 15

### Approches philosophiques et théologiques

Paul-Augustin DEPROOST

Voyages intérieurs en *Odyssée* dans la pensée antique et chrétienne..... 27

Máire Áine NÍ MHAINNÍN

Interiority and Identity ..... 47

Anna Maria VILENO

Les sefirot dans l'homme. Une lecture kabbalistique de l'intériorité..... 59

Elena TORRI

L'Église visible par rapport à l'Église invisible. Une question  
« esthétique » à l'origine de la théologie de J. Ratzinger..... 71

Daniel ATTALA

Démolition de l'esthétique et libération de la conscience.  
L'art selon Macedonio Fernández ..... 85

Grégori JEAN et Jean LECLERCQ  
Le dedans et le dehors. Pour une nouvelle topologie  
de la vie subjective et de la création artistique .....99

Rodolphe GAUTHIER  
L'esthétique comme expérience intérieure. Réflexion sur  
la notion d'art à partir de Georges Bataille ..... 111

### **Approches littéraires**

Thierry TREMBLAY  
Expérience et incommunicabilité. À propos de Bataille,  
Klossowski et Daumal..... 121

Andrée LEROUSSEAU  
Espaces-métaphores de l'intériorité dans *Mondes* de G. Kolmar ..... 135

Christophe ROBIN  
Intériorité et altérité dans *La Ligne d'ombre* de Joseph Conrad ..... 151

Daniel WARZECHA  
Spatialisation du sacré dans *Les chroniques de Narnia*..... 165

Marie HERBILLON  
À l'orée de soi. Poétique de l'extime dans les carnets  
autobiographiques de Murray Bail..... 179

Aude BONORD  
« *Inventer* [une] âme ». La vie intérieure du saint : enjeux romanesques  
et culturels dans la littérature de l'entre-deux-guerres ..... 193

Eamon MAHER  
Interiority in Some Novels by François Mauriac  
and Georges Bernanos ..... 207



Bernard BACH

La défaite de l'intériorité face à la barbarie du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle.

Franz Werfel, *Jeremias. Höret die Stimme*. Marcel Beyer, *Flughunde*..... 221

Christophe MEURÉE

Le complexe de Jonas : prophétie et intériorité..... 235

Estelle MATHEY

Prophéties intimes : la parole et la voix chez Antoine Volodine..... 251

### **Approches musicologiques et artistiques**

Pierre DENJEAN

Dépasser l'indicible par les effets physiques de la musique ?..... 269

Joëlle CAULLIER

L'art d'entendre. Un chemin vers la connaissance ..... 283

Xavier GRAVEND-TIROLE

Du bruit dans la spiritualité. Penser le silence après John Cage..... 297

Monika SALMON-SIAMA

Du dolorisme à la simplicité de l'art populaire pour se « rapprocher »  
de Dieu. L'exemple iconographique du *Christ affligé* ..... 313

Matthieu DUBOIS

De l'efficacité guerrière à la compassion : la voie spirituelle  
de l'Aïkido. Paradoxes et enjeux de la pratique martiale moderne..... 327

## **Témoignage d'un parcours de recherche**

Tatiana TRANKVILLITSKAIA

L'idéologie stalinienne et la notion de héros-ennemi  
dans la peinture soviétique ..... 345

## **Épilogue**

Catherine MAIGNANT

Apprivoiser le minotaure. Intériorité et esthétique  
dans la pensée de Mark Patrick Hederman..... 363

Mark Patrick HEDERMAN

*The Mystery of the Charity* of Geoffrey Hill..... 379

**Table des matières** ..... 395





# Esthétique et Spiritualité III À l'école de la vie intérieure

Séminaire transfrontalier co-organisé par l'École doctorale en Langues et Lettres de la Communauté française de Belgique (ED3) et l'École doctorale SHS Lille-Nord de France, consacré en 2012 et 2013 à l'intériorité et aux espaces de l'intériorité dans les productions culturelles.

La collection « Esthétique et Spiritualité » entend combler une lacune de l'historiographie littéraire et artistique en considérant de concert l'évolution des sensibilités esthétiques et celle des formes et ancrages de la spiritualité. Elle convoque le dialogue de plusieurs disciplines des sciences humaines (notamment littérature, histoire de l'art, musicologie, philosophie, sociologie des religions, etc.) en vue de mener l'étude des manifestations de la spiritualité, religieuse ou non, dans les faits de culture, selon une double approche chronologique et problématique.

Sous la direction de Baudouin Decharneux (FNRS/ULB),  
Catherine Maignant (Lille 3) & Myriam Watthee-Delmotte (FNRS/UCL)

*Les flammes noires 1, Albert Palma*



ISBN : 978-2-8066-3033-9  
Dépot légal : 2014/9202/3033  
Prix : 24,00 €  
ID EME : E4046074