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The theme of grace in Bernanos' *Diary of a Country Priest*

Eamon Maher describes a prophetic novel, published in 1936, which still holds a message for all of us engaged in that 'age-old struggle between good and evil'.



EAMON MAHER

THE MYSTERY of grace is as elusive as any mystery. Try to come to grips with it and it eludes us like mercury or fairy gossamer. Yet no one is immune to grace. It may only strike you at odd moments — as when spotting a red sunset covering a furze-covered mountain or a friend opening her eyes after an accident or the sound of Mozart on a sultry morning, or the first cry of a newborn baby. . . . These moments are natural embodiments of grace and come uncalled by any religious motivation. But so too does grace. The spirit of God is nearer than I am to self, irrespective of whether I know of him or believe in him.

Writers like Graham Greene and Flannery O'Connor have tried to come to terms with grace in their writings but obliquely. No-one has tackled the subject more forcibly than Georges Bernanos (1888-1948), the writer whose name is synonymous with the Catholic Novel in France, a genre of writing which is no longer being fostered by contemporary French novelists. Maybe, having fallen into disuse, this type of novel is no longer attracting a wide readership. Maybe it is out of date, irrelevant in the modern context. Not at all: Bernanos' writings, especially his *Diary of a Country Priest*¹ have a prophetic quality which is fresh and universal. Like all good literature, it has stood the test of time.

His literary world is fused through and through with Catholicism. Two of his best-loved and most admired heroes, Donissan and the Curé d'Ambricourt, are priests. The supernatural and the mystical are major elements in his characters' lives. Sin and grace, salvation and perdition, God and Satan, good and evil, recur as central themes. Whereas in Mauriac the psychological recesses of the soul are examined minutely, almost microscopically, the novelist evaded an analysis of the workings of grace. In fact, Mauriac's novels are read by believers and non-believers alike and with equal profit — that is to his credit. In Bernanos' case, however, we must have some insights

into Catholic theology to appreciate the motivation of his characters. The dramatic situations they face are far-reaching in their consequences: wrong decisions could bring about eternal damnation. Satan is working constantly in a demonic world where religion is declining as a social and spiritual force. At times the Prince of evil appears to be winning in the struggle against God. It is all very dramatic, as powerful in its own way as Milton's portrayal of Satan or of Hell.



Georges Bernanos

Georges Bernanos was a Catholic and his novels possess a clearly 'Catholic' tone, but he was no simple mouthpiece for the Church. In fact, he was not slow to point out faults which he saw in the institution or to criticise its abuses at times. His prophetic vision gave him a glimpse of what the French Church would look like: with a decrease in religious fervour, the growing influence of secular and materialistic values, fewer

priests, widespread spiritual inertia. His prophecy is well on the way to fulfilment. By 1943, Henri Godin, in his pamphlet, *France un pays de mission?*, was able to state that France had become a missionary country, that the Church had lost the working classes to Marxism or spiritual apathy. Vatican II sought to open the Church to the modern world. Its documents alienated many sincere Catholics in France who did not see the necessity for change. (We do not need to be reminded of the support, tacit or otherwise, which Archbishop Lefèbvre received in his own country.) Only ninety-nine priests were ordained in France in 1977, it was announced at the conference of French bishops at Lourdes in October 1978.² The situation has not improved since. The attentive reader of Bernanos should not be surprised at such an outcome. A close look at his most famous novel, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, reveals that as early as the 1930's the French Church was heading for irrelevance as well as hostility.

The Diary was published by Plon in 1936. It is set in a rural parish, Ambricourt, where evil seems to be in control. It is to this parish that the young priest-hero is sent. He is immediately upset by the *ennui* which he senses in his surroundings:

I wonder if man has ever before experienced this contagion, this leprosy of boredom: an aborted despair, a shameful form of despair in some way like the fermentation of Christianity in decay (p.2).

A declining influence

The French *ennui* means more than simple 'boredom'. It evokes an aura of spiritual lethargy, an existentialist anguish which possesses the mind. Ambricourt parish is in some ways a microcosm for the macrocosm of French society in the 1930's, a society in which Christianity was 'in decay'. One hears talk in France of a 'post-war Catholic revival'. But this can be misleading; the revival was, in fact, one of quality, not quantity. Major Catholic writers like Bernanos and Mauriac flourished but regular church-going was still at a low ebb. In addition, the traditional influence of the parish priest was everywhere declining.

The naive hero of Bernanos' novel struggles to win back some of the influence lost by the Church. But his efforts at evangelising are met with hostility and disdain. One step forward, two steps backwards. He is tricked by tradesmen, says Mass in a virtually empty church, fails to secure the good will or support of the local landlord. He is an inefficient administrator; too soft, too self-effacing, too servile. And yet he is living a strong inner life of self-sacrifice and has the sensitivity to detect pain and suffering among his parishioners.

The doctor, Delbende, who 'would hurl questions

at a crucifix hanging on his bedroom wall' (p.90), had a problem with the Church's attitude to the poor. One day he challenges the Curé:

The fact remains that a poor man, a real poor man, an honest man, goes of his own accord to what he considers his proper place, the lowest in the house of the Lord (p.63).

He need not have bothered: the Curé knew poverty and the abuse of the poor from his early childhood. He does not rebel against penury; rather he sees it as a way of identifying more closely with the passion of Christ who chose to endure the darkness of pain, humiliation and death so that his people might live in his light. The Curé has no glib answers for Delbende. Instead, he opts to take his pain upon himself because:

True pain coming out of a man belongs primarily to God, it seems to me. I try and take it humbly to my heart, just as it is. I endeavour to make it mine, to live it. And I understand all the hidden meaning of the expression which has become hackneyed now: to commune with, because I really 'commune' with his (Delbende's) pain (p.64).

Some time later he learns that the doctor has died in a shooting accident and that suicide is suspected. He is distraught and seeks out his friend, the Curé de Torcy, who also knew Delbende. Torcy will not tolerate any talk of suicide: God alone will judge their dead friend. Torcy is a robust man, as efficient in running the affairs of his parish as his young colleague is ineffectual in Ambricourt. He sees the spirit of prayer in the Curé d'Ambricourt but he, the pragmatist, realises that this will not help him to run his parish. He advises the young man to pray hard and to keep busy, not to allow people to use him, to be firm. He might as well have told him to change the colour of his skin. The Curé can work no harder than he is now labouring. His attempts at prayer often end up in *acidie*. The cancer in his stomach, of which he is unaware, prevents him from eating healthy food. He is forced to confine himself to a diet of bread and wine — symbols of the Eucharist. His appearance and erratic behaviour lead his parishioners to believe him to be an alcoholic. It suits them to so interpret his behaviour. The Canon la Motte-Beuvron explains why:

You see, my dear child, these people don't hate you for being simple, they're on their guard against it, that's all. Your simplicity is a kind of flame which scorches them. You go through the world with that lowly smile of yours as though you begged their pardon for being alive while all the time you carry a torch which you seem to mistake for a crozier (pp.145-146).

One person who is not on her guard against the parish priest is Chantal, the landlord's daughter. She has been made to suffer the infidelity of her father with the governess and the indifference of her mother, whose maternal instincts have been crushed by the premature death of her young son. Chantal has lost the innocence of youth and she seeks to test the Curé at every opportunity. Talking about her father and the governess, she says:

I heard them in the night. I was right under their window in the park. They don't even bother to draw the curtains now (p.103).

She is teasing him, searching for his prurience. She says that she plans to go to Paris, to 'disgrace' herself, in order to punish her parents. The Curé, in a sudden moment of illumination, asks her for the letter in her bag. She is taken aback. 'You must be the devil', (p.106) she exclaims. There was indeed a letter, the contents of which are never revealed to us. Chantal meekly hands it over to him, realising that he can read minds. Despite her cruelty towards him, the Curé bears her no ill-will; rather he pities her. He sees that she is in revolt against God and the circumstances of her life.

An unusual, almost alarming nobility bore witness to the power of evil, of sin, that sin which was not her own — God, are we really such wretched creatures that a proud soul in revolt must needs turn against itself? (p.107).

Bringer of peace

This priest, considered inept by the majority of his parishioners and superiors alike, attracts those who are suffering most. To the countess, in rebellion against a God who in her mind has taken her only son, he brings peace. Not before a struggle of significant proportions takes place, however. The countess believes that she is living a model Christian life. She goes to Mass and the sacraments — but with a heart of stone. Love, the most basic Christian virtue, has disappeared from her life: 'Hell is not to love any more, madame', (p.127) the Curé tells her. She slowly and painfully comes to realise that by rebelling against God's will she has endangered her eventual reunion with her dead son. For a long time she has been unable to recite the Lord's prayer because of the line: 'Thy will be done'. By the end of their fateful interview she will have rediscovered peace and will be able to accept God's will. After the Curé's departure that night the countess dies but not before writing him a note. We could easily, and with some justification, claim that this episode is too pat, too contrived. It is a weakness in the technique of the plot. She says:



I have lived in the most horrible solitude alone with the desperate memory of a child. And it seems to me that another child has brought me to life again (p.136).

All the priest can do is to reflect on the peace he has brought to another while he himself continues to struggle. After the countess' death he is accused of spiritual blackmail, of having left the woman in a state of despair. He has no redress against these false accusations other than divulging the contents of the letter, which would mean his moral collapse. He remains silent, like Christ. Meanwhile, his health continues to deteriorate. It is as though he has taken the moral cancer at the heart of his parish upon himself, as though he is grappling with it like Christ with his father in Gethsemane. Sleepless nights, chronic stomach cramps, attacks on his character, all contribute to his earthly passion.

This edition published in 1956.

As he returns to the presbytery one evening he is attacked by a fit of violent coughing. He wakes up in a pool of his own blood, stands up and faints again — the comparisons with the scourging and the road to Calvary are obvious. He is discovered by Seraphita, the young star of his catechism class who had betrayed him by saying, in front of her friends, that she had been attentive in class merely because he had 'beautiful eyes'. Now it is she who nurses him, wipes his face clean. She acknowledges her fascination with him:

'It isn't that you're anythin' to look at', she muttered. 'It's just 'cause you're sad. You're sad even when you smile. I think that if I only knew why you was sad I shouldn't be wicked no more' (p.178).

Source of good

Mary Magdalen or Veronica in modern dress? Who knows? What is clear, however, is that Seraphita's innocence has been destroyed. Exposed to evil at a very young age, she is the victim of pressures she cannot withstand. For it is difficult to be good when you encounter evil everywhere, when *ennui* has taken possession of the souls of so many. It is significant that she sees the good in the sick man, that she would like to be close to him, to find out the reasons for his sadness. Then she might not be wicked any more. Good is emanating from him, God's grace which she senses vaguely.

It is in Lille that the Curé discovers the true nature of his illness, from an atheist doctor who is addicted to morphia and who is sentenced to die himself in a short time. The priest reproaches himself for not thinking of God when he first receives the news:

However hard I try now, I know I shall never understand by what terrible mischance I was able at such a time to forget the very name of God. I was alone, utterly alone, facing my death — and that death was a wiping out and nothing more (p.214).

His reaction is a human one, later to be spiritualised. The thought of death momentarily erased the joy of the resurrection — Christ himself endured similar doubts. The Curé's 'dark night of the soul' has now reached its apogée. Bernanos' spiritual convictions take over at the end of the saint's life. In the apartment of his friend, Dufréty, a former priest, the Curé's last words will be:

Does it matter? Grace is everywhere (p.232).

It is finished. His crucifixion is over. Grace has prevailed. The words quoted above are the crucial ones

in the novel. Grace for the Curé lies in the ability to love others more than self, to take their pain as his pain, to see suffering as proof of God's love. For it is by suffering that he has aligned himself with Christ. The Curé's life in the midst of a parish given over to evil shows how grace can win out, not in a spectacular fashion — that is not God's way — but in the transformation that can take place in a person's soul, in the vision and insights which may appear only at special moments but which are none the less real for their elusiveness.

The Diary of a Country Priest was described by the *New York Times Book Review* as 'a novel of French village life which achieves a universal quality'. This universality is realised because Ambricourt is not merely a parish in France; it is the battlefield where the age-old struggle between good and evil continues unabated. The Curé's life succeeds in convincing us that humility and love are at the core of all Christian behaviour and that suffering can pave the way to eternal joy. *The Diary* will always have a message for readers who are struggling in their own lives. Who among us would not share the Curé's dying wish:

Why worry, why look ahead? If I feel afraid I shall say: I am afraid, and not be ashamed of it. As soon as Our Lord appears before me may His eyes set me at rest (pp.228-229).

Christ himself sweated blood from fear. He died as a criminal, with shame as his comfort. Maybe Bernanos sometimes lets his spiritual convictions too free a rein in his writings, but his elucidation of the workings of grace in most uncongenial and unpromising situations has given a novel whose power to stir the emotions to some sort of catharsis is as effective today as it was sixty odd years ago. There are flaws in the plot, especially with the obviousness of his overall message, but that does not detract seriously from the impact of one man, a clown for God, who lifted himself to heights of cooperation with grace, not in the traditional heroic manner but in the anti-heroic mode of the Bernanos genre. And in so lifting himself, he raised others to deflect their eyes from mammon and look up for a glimpse of God.

The Curé was vindicated in death — in the quiet pondering of those whom he influenced. That was his epitaph and that is how Bernanos envisioned him in his study in novel-form of the workings of grace.

Notes

1. *The Diary of a Country Priest*, Image Books, New York, 1954. All my references will be taken from this edition.
2. *The Times*, London, 31 October 1978.

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