

'The Time of the Saints Always Comes'¹

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Having imprudently decided to speak to you tonight about a country in which I have never set foot ... an authentic inhabitant of which I'm not at all sure I've ever met ... in short, since I decided to speak to you about the saints and sanctity, the miracle, the true ... incontestable miracle would be that you manage to listen to me without boredom.²

The words could seem forced coming from someone whose novels were famous for their saintly characters, whose personal devotion to the cult of the saints was prodigious, and who was given to repeating that 'our Church is the Church of the Saints' and 'the time of the saints always comes.' But there in Tunisia in 1947, a year before his death, giving a talk to religious sisters, George Bernanos was not being falsely modest. Talking or writing about saints or sanctity he had been doing for much of a lifetime, but he had not for that become certain that he was altogether justified in doing so nor that his contemporaries would or should be prepared to listen to him on the subject. François Mauriac once said of Bernanos, 'the misfortune of not being a saint, which we hardly suffer from at all, he assumed in our place and for us.' If Mauriac was correct, then we would have to conclude that Bernanos failed his favourite subject, or at least in the purpose for which he had taken it up. For more surely his intention in both talking and writing about saints and sanctity was to make *us* reassume that misfortune ourselves. It is an historical question to know whether his contemporaries had; it is much more pertinent to know whether his present-day readers might. The latter is the question we wish to explore in this article.

Bernanos told the religious sisters that he was not sure he had ever met an 'authentic inhabitant' of that country of saints about which he wished to speak to them. Very likely he was assuming that most of his hearers had not met one either. That missing real-life encounter was a major concern of Bernanos. If he liked to repeat that 'the time of the saints always comes,' it was because too many of his contemporaries, he feared, believed it to have definitively passed. It would be too facile to offer that as *the* explanation for his creation of fictional saints. Too facile, but not altogether mistaken. Bernanos did hope that his novels would serve to re-

acquaint his readers with the reality of, and more, the desire for holiness. He even sometimes referred, though not without mocking himself, to his fictional saints in terms which would suggest to some that he did not always distinguish between real ones and those of his literary imagination. Bernanos drew inspiration for his fictional saints from real-life examples, especially those of Thérèse of Lisieux and the Curé of Ars. He also wrote one or two brief lives of historical saints; namely on St. Dominic and Joan of Arc. Was Bernanos populating his own country of saints to compensate for the 'authentic' ones he had never met? We would propose rather that he was struggling to convince his reader that that country of saints which seemed so distant from the modern world was in reality the one we all inhabit. Paradoxical that fiction should be put in service to recall us to reality. The paradox was not lost on Bernanos. He manifests a profound, and at times, anguished ambivalence concerning just what kind of encounter with a saint was possible from a written life. That ambivalence as much as the saintly characters in his works might bring today's reader of Bernanos to feel, indeed to suffer, the misfortune of not being a saint.

Holiness can be a problem as much as its lack. The 'highest reality which a human being aided by grace can know',³ Bernanos said. But in the measure that the saints soar the heights of reality, in an equal measure they can seem cut off from those who inhabit less exalted regions. The higher the saint climbs the ladder of holiness, the more likely some inhabitants of the lower regions might wish to kick the ladder and tumble the climber down. Make them more human! More like the rest of us! And in a sense that is what the modern world, to use an ugly word in the bernanosian vocabulary, might seem to have wanted to achieve. According to Bernanos, historians and 'moralists' deserved a large share of the blame. The former by their critical method had tumbled the saintly climber by excluding from the realm of investigation all that might be ascribed to the stirrings of a supernatural charity. So one of the great lower region characters in Bernanos' fiction is the abbé Cénabre, a priest who has lost his faith but continues to imposture his sacerdotal functions. He writes celebrated histories of the mystics, 'writing of sanctity as if charity did not exist.'⁴ That, for Bernanos, was a contradiction in terms as well as in method. The 'moralists', for their part, deserved blame for also excluding the supernatural from their understanding of the moral life. Their method, a 'hygiene' Bernanos termed it, consisted in presuming to be able to account for the workings of the interior life as if those could be explained by a mere 'conflict of instincts' rather than a spiritual battle between good and evil or between a love which is more than just natural and a hatred (most often of self) which is often truly diabolical. Bernanos's novels are thus peopled with doctors and psychologists ineptly

trying to cure souls by intrinsically inadequate means.

Now it could seem by these sweeping condemnations of modern methods as if Bernanos' only strategy in writing of saints and sanctity was to open a space apart in the country of modernity for a superhuman or heroic hagiography. As if he were preparing to put the saint back on the ladder by dismissing equally historical explanation of the heights which the human being might have achieved and scientific remedy for the lows to which the human being might sink. There is enough in Bernanos well known adoption of the language, and promotion of the ideal, of chivalry, military honour, and saintly heroism to warrant such an interpretation. There is also enough in Bernanos first two works on saints to make us believe that he had experimented with this strategy.

In 1926 he published both his first novel, *Sous le soleil de Satan*, and a brief life of an historical saint, *Saint Dominique*. The novel, like the 'life', has as its principal character a saintly priest. The contrast between the works and the two saints could not, however, be more striking. Bernanos' Dominic shines under a halo, his life, we are told, being among those great destinies which 'escape every determinism [and] blaze with a dazzling liberty.'⁵ Bernanos' abbé Donnisan, also called the Saint of Lumbres, sombres rather in a desert of inner turmoil, pushed to the abyss of despair 'under the sun of Satan.' Neither portrait of sanctity really succeeds in convincing. The supposedly historical Dominic is too little human, an abstraction rather than a man, moved by profound sentiments, a wave of charity in fact, but by necessary contrast—as Bernanos' understands the theological virtue—scarcely capable of having an idea or plan in his head. Over a lifetime but three voluntary impulses are attributed to the saint: as a youth, the wish to sell himself to save a woman's son; as an adult, 'to give everything'; and as an old man, the order to his brethren to give away all goods and properties.⁶ The rest of the saint's life just happens. Of course it does not *just* happen: charity moves all, including Dominic with it. A doubt lingers though: what human role had this plan-less, will-less preacher to play in his own saintly life? The fictional Donnisan, by contrast, is too darkly human, a man so absorbed in a personal struggle against pride and hatred that his charity *only* really becomes manifest in a Faustian bargain to offer his soul and the consolations of the Spirit for the salvation of sinners. An offer whose consequences are depicted in a face-to-face meeting with Satan, personified in the guise of a horse-trader. People come flocking to Donnisan for his preaching, for an encounter with a 'hard truth', which the saint has the capacity to make them feel has already injured him before them.⁷ It has. He has been given the power to see into souls. What he sees leads him dangerously near a hatred of the sinner and into a despair of

humanity.⁸ One is left wondering whether the abbé Donnisan believes more in Satan than in God. The answer is clear of course, but it is desperately close. The weakness in both portraits is best explained not by a failure on the part of their author's creativity—the language is powerful and each text works for its genre—as by an indecisiveness on how to make sanctity live again for a modernity to which Bernanos himself could not easily be reconciled.

In his first two works on saints Bernanos is too preoccupied with his battle against the historians and the moralists. He was pushing by reaction in two directions: save the saints from the common lot of humanity by eliminating nearly all which might allow them to be real human agents; scare the sinner into holiness or at least the desire for it by elevating the occurrence of evil to an ontological and personified mega-reality. The saintly life is thus removed from historical and psychological investigation. Unfortunately, little space remained for the human in this bernanosian 'country' in which either divine or diabolical forces occupied skies, land and seas, as well as the human heart. Bernanos was possibly doing more than his perceived enemies to depopulate the world of its saints. He did, though, recognise a degree of failure, at least perceive the enormity of the task of bringing a saint to life. For in the year of these works' publication, he gave an interview which reveals his hesitations.

Bernanos was asked whether the readers of *Sous le soleil de Satan* should see in his abbé Donnisan a type of Curé of Ars. He denies it emphatically, perhaps not the source of inspiration so much as the implied presumption regarding his intention:

Oh, no! I am not so bold as to propose to ever write, to recompose from within, the life of a saint—I mean a true authentic saint given as such by the Church. Alas, there are already too many miserable attempts ... And even in the case of an imaginary saint, it would be folly to wish to force words to express that which is, by its nature, inexpressible, the peace above all language.⁹

This comment bears, anticipatorily or retrospectively,¹⁰ on his St. Dominic as much as on that of the link between the Curé of Ars and the abbé Donnisan. What interests us is the basis on which a writer could be supposed to express that which is 'by nature inexpressible.' Something Bernanos, despite his denial, had and would in fact attempt to do. Now, no historical life is apt to be written without serious attention to the record of the person's thoughts, intentions, achievements and failures. No true moral life, moreover, can be described without some reasonable method of connecting the thoughts and intentions to the achievements and the failures—and credibly to the available record. In his *Saint Dominique*, the

historical record is not ignored, but it hangs like a useless appendage. Bernanos insists that there are 'no methods or original recipes' for making sense of a saint's life.¹¹ Both the interior and exterior life of Dominic are consequently subsumed into a movement of charity which, it also, lacks any method or recipe according to Bernanos. At least if that supernatural virtue is, as he defines it, what most characterises a saint: for 'sanctity has no formulae, or better, it has them all.'¹² *Saint Dominique* is not so much a life of a saint as its author's one-time conception of sanctity. A sanctity expressed literarily by diminishing those essential elements of a life which we most expect to find in the biography of a human being. The 'authentic' saint indeed remained 'inexpressible.'

What of his first fictional saint? Bernanos in the interview cited above followed an initial denial with an affirmation. He concedes that his abbé Donnisan is a kind of saint. Donnisan is a saint in the form of a 'manuscript' in contrast with a saint one might take to be a 'completed work of art.' This was not Bernanos admitting a failure in literary creativity but Bernanos expressing his reasons for portraying the saintly character as he had.

I didn't require of my saint aesthetic emotions, but lessons. I dreamed to see in him, sublimated in grace, our disappointed love, the perilous despair in which hatred already groans ... How could I have straightaway presented them with one of those miracle-working saints, who scarcely stand up, are ever ready to escape from us, to conceal themselves in the clouds, just like a ray of the sun or an angel?¹³

The manuscript-saint, he concluded, with its 'gaps and crossings-out', was able to instruct us; whereas the completed work of art-saint was for 'lavishing certitude and rapture.' One might think that Bernanos' manuscript of the abbé Donnisan could have used, if not certitude and rapture, at least a bit of whimsical scribbling. But even the intensity of despair and the hatred expressed in the saint's character—which Bernanos reminds us here are the other side of a 'disappointed love'—were already indications of the direction in which his conception of sanctity would develop in his later fictional saints: towards an exploration of emotions not very aesthetic but at least more recognisably human.

Bernanos' first two writings of saints' lives err in opposite directions: the St. Dominic is placed so high on the ladder of sanctity that he escapes from us 'like a ray of the sun or an angel'; while it is with some difficulty that the Saint of Lumbres can be placed on the ladder at all. Indeed if Bernanos conceived of a saint's life as 'inexpressible, a peace above all language,' the conclusion of *Sous le soleil de Satan* confirms the ambiguity in the tormented sanctity of Donnisan. The peace which ever

eludes him during his life is never expressed, but just once 'mimed' to the person who discovers his corpse: 'You wanted my peace ... Come and get it.'¹⁴ The character who discovers the corpse is a celebrated author who had been musing about writing a book on the saint. Should we not see there a sign of Bernanos' own torment in trying to express literarily the 'inexpressible' life of a saint? Sanctity, whether in history or in fiction, eludes the writer.

Torment or no, Bernanos did not abandon his creative effort to bring to life saints and sanctity for the modern world. There were to be more attempts in fiction and at least one other for an historical saint, but nothing equalled his masterpiece. In the last of his novels written with a saint as principal character and published in 1936, ten years after his first, Bernanos managed to project his torment of expressing the inexpressible onto his diary-writing priest. The memorable evocation from the first pages of the *Diary of a Country Priest* of a modernity 'devoured by malaise' alerts us to the novelist's progress in creating a credible and realistic 'country' for his saint to inhabit. In this country we seem far removed from that too dark world 'under the sun of Satan', without having nevertheless lost the sense of what is at stake in the battle between good and evil, love and hatred. Bernanos even allows this latter saintly priest, the curé d'Ambricourt, to correct the manichean temptation of the earlier abbé Donnisan: 'the world of Evil escapes ... our imagination. Indeed, I can't succeed always in conceiving it as a world, a universe. It is, it will always be, but a rough draft, the sketching out of a hideous creation, an aborted one, at the extreme limit of being.'¹⁵ Hell is not a world either. The curé d'Ambricourt, in his famous encounter with the Countess, defines it as 'to no longer love.'¹⁶ Now, if Donnisan, according to his creator, was but a saint in 'manuscript', tempted to despair and hate in a world over which Satan reigned, we may suggest that this reduction of Evil to a 'rough draft' and this interiorisation of Hell as a cessation of loving is precisely what permits the saintly priest of Ambricourt in his 'parish like all the rest' to approach, as near as Bernanos was ever to achieve, a 'completed work of art.' The attraction of sanctity need no longer be guaranteed by the revulsion of sinfulness; nor the reality of the saint left in doubt by the mega-reality of Satan. To be sure Satan still has a presence in the country of the *Diary* and in the sinfulness of the human heart; but he is encountered more in the experience of physical and emotional suffering than in a person-to-Personified combat.

Defending his portrait of Donnisan, Bernanos had asked how he could have 'presented *them* with one of those miracle-working saints always ready to escape from us ...' The 'them' were, in that interview of 1926, an undefined '*les plus malheureux*.' Whoever those most

unfortunates were supposed to be then, they had become, by the time of the *Diary*, people of a 'parish like all the rest.' The curé d'Ambricourt was an everyman's saint being presented to everyone. His timidity, his self-doubt, his feelings of loneliness, the hurt he experiences when gossiped about or when held in contempt, his sense of duty stretching towards love, even his anxiety about the solidity of his faith, approach him, more than any of Bernanos' real or fictional saints, to a credibly modern human being of the parish. Perhaps most modernly human because the source of his greatest struggles and the cause of his most severe doubts is the ordinary reality of human suffering. In others as in himself. What more perfect way to incarnate that banal reality than to hear in the saint's own words his reaction to learning that his lack of appetite and his abdominal pains, which the parish gossips attribute to alcoholism, are the symptoms of a terminal cancer? 'Cancer ... Cancer of the stomach ... The word above all is what hit me ...' A word—a name—the saint did not utter struck him with even greater force.

I was still in the same state of distraction, of absence. Whatever I do I know well that I will never manage to understand by what strange marvel I was able in such circumstances to forget even the name of God. I was alone, inexpressibly alone, in face of my own death, and this death was no more than the privation of being—nothing more.¹⁷

A dizzy, absent feeling before the prospect of death for a moment wrong-foots even a saint's piety. But how much the humanity in sanctity revives before the reality of mortality! Of course the curé d'Ambricourt will call upon the name of God and accept his agony as a participation in the suffering of Christ. He will die, not lacking hope to reach paradise, less fearful about the severity of judgment than anxious for a bit of reassurance.

It is possible that the good God make of [my dying] an example, a lesson. I'd rather it roused to pity. Why not? I liked people, and I know that this land of the living was dear to me. I won't die without shedding tears. As nothing is more unfamiliar to me than stoic indifference why would I want the death of an impassive? Plutarch's heroes only inspire me with both fear and boredom. If I were to enter paradise with such a disguise, it seems to me that I would cause even my guardian angel to smile. Why worry? Why anticipate? If I'm afraid, I will say: I'm afraid—not ashamed. May the first look of the Lord, when he shows me his Holy Face, be thus one to reassure...¹⁸

Bernanos had wanted his first fictional saint, the abbé Donnisan, to give lessons. But the curé d'Ambricourt does not want to be a lesson.

Saints are not didactic tools; they are human beings. What explains the success of the later fictional saint is the resemblance of his world and his person to our own. The curé d'Ambricourt's battle is not the least bit pretty, his temptations not unreal, his enemy no less fierce. His triumph is no less inspiring. He gives us lessons we can use. Bernanos had used them too—finally. In a letter dated the year he had published his first novel, he wrote describing his reaction on learning of his father's terminal illness.

God is testing me again. My poor old father is suffering from one of these vile tumours which have always seemed to me, more than any other evil, to be the representation of Satan, the symbol of his monstrous fecundity within souls. He has cancer of the liver. I work in a spirit of complete and fundamental anguish. I have the experience of dying myself.¹⁹

It took Bernanos from *Sous le soleil de Satan* and its portrait of Donnisan to the *Diary of a Country Priest* and its portrait of the curé d'Ambricourt to give expression to a real-life battle worthy of a modern saint. Surely, as could only be the case, it was a real-life experience which gave Bernanos the creative power to bring holiness to reality.

The realism in the saintly characterisation of the nameless country priest of Ambricourt may owe more to the format of the diary than to anything else. Bernanos, despite his dismissal of methods or recipes for sanctity and his denial of being bold enough to try to express the 'inexpressible', had actually hit upon a means of enabling us see into the life of a saint. We have not in this article addressed what Bernanos—or we moderns for that matter—should believe to be *real* works of saintly charity. Even if Bernanos could say that the 'saint always stands alone at the foot of the cross', he was far from indifferent to the works which are the fruits of a supernatural gift and they take up a large part of his novels, even if we have excluded mention of them here. It just goes without saying when we think of the saints: their charity and their works of charity are indeed how we recognise them in the first place. As Bernanos said of Dominic, if we could but see with 'a unique and pure gaze, the Order of Preachers would appear to us as the charity itself of St. Dominic realised in space and time, as his visible life of prayer.'²⁰ Short, however, of that kind of gaze, the Order may have sometimes seemed—and still seem—not a little unworthy of its first saint and his charity.²¹ Dominic was an historical human being, not a charitable institution. It is for that reason, if lacking a way into the human life of holiness and compelled to regard the saint as one would a conceptual model, that we may despair of our own works, and in our own desire for holiness. Still, worse, we may be tempted, as Bernanos was in his *Saint Dominique*, to make do rather with

490

grandiose conceptions of a sanctity in which charity means a giving of one's all and a giving to all tantamount to a giving away of one's humanity. That might elevate some by its 'dazzling liberty'; it will sombre others from its dizzy heights; it might bore still more with its airy unreality. Bernanos remained ever keen on an exalted language of childlike, heroic, soldieresque sanctity—such as he imagined Joan of Arc's to have been.²² At least once though, he managed to bring a saint down to human reality. It is there that even a fictional saint like the curé d'Ambricourt may give us the courage to reascend a real ladder of holiness. Suppose Dominic were swept away in a wave of charity as Bernanos portrays him. Suppose, too, that his charity were manifested in what he gave to others and refused to keep for himself. We see the works still, perhaps we still live on and from the fruits of that giving. Suppose now that the words of the curé d'Ambricourt express the interior life of the real Dominic—words which Bernanos could not find for his portrait of the historical saint:

My God, I give you all, and with a good heart. Only, I don't know how to give, I give as one allows himself to be taken. The best thing is to remain calm. For if I don't know how to give, You, you know how to take ... And yet I would have wished to be once, just one time, generous and extravagant towards You!²³

What is more human than having to learn to give? What is more like charity than learning to allow ourselves to be taken? What could be more holy than the desire to give back what we can alone have been given? Fictional to be sure, but the curé d'Ambricourt's, which could well have been Dominic's, would be a real country we could live in. It would even be, thanks to Bernanos, a country of 'authentic' saints.

- 1 Citations of Bernanos from *Essais et écrits de combat*, Vols. I (1971) & II (1995), eds. Michel Estève et. al. and *Oeuvres romanesques* (1961) ed. Albert Béguin et. al, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Gallimard, Paris). All translations from the French are my own.
- 2 'Nos Amis les Saints' in Vol. II, p. 1371.
- 3 Interview with Frédéric Lefèvre in 1926, Vol. I., p. 1040.
- 4 *L'Imposture*, Oeuvres, p. 329.
- 5 *Saint Dominique*, Vol. I, p. 3.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp.,6, 11, 15.
- 7 *Sous le soleil de Satan*, Oeuvres, p. 138.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 227.
- 9 Interview, Vol. I, p. 1043.
- 10 The Interview with Lefèvre was actually a text presented to him by Bernanos. It was originally published in April of 1926. Bernanos' *Saint*

Dominique was published the same year in December, but there is no extant manuscript of the latter and so it is not known for certain whether it was composed before or after the Interview. See Notes, Vol. I, pp. 1319, 1649.

- 11 *Saint Dominique*, Vol. I, p. 4.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Interview, Vol. I, p. 1043.
- 14 *Sous le soleil de Satan*, Oeuvres, p. 308.
- 15 *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, Oeuvres, p.1143.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p.1157.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 1241.
- 18 *Ibid.* p. 1256.
- 19 Albert Béguin, *Bernanos par lui-même* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1954), p. 112.
- 20 *Saint Dominique*, Vol. I, p. 5.
- 21 Bernanos changed his mind about identifying the Order with the charity of its founder over the matter of the Inquisition. See *Les grands cimetières sous la lune*, Vol. I, p. 390; Notes, p. 1329.
- 22 Bernanos succeeds better than he had with St. Dominic in making Joan of Arc seem like a real human being. Nevertheless the humanity is still subordinated to a now revised conception of sanctity. See *Jeanne, relapse et sainte*, Vol. I, pp. 21–42.
- 23 *Journal.*, Oeuvres, p. 1245.

‘Great Cemeteries Under the Moon’: Bernanos and the Spanish Civil War

Fernando Cervantes

It is not often that a single work of literature can be earmarked as a watershed in its author’s intellectual development, but *Les grands cimetières sous la lune* seems to offer an almost incontestable case for such an honour. Before its publication in 1938, its author, Georges Bernanos, had been widely known as conservative royalist who had had no qualms about openly supporting Charles Maurras and *L’Action française*, even after their condemnation by the pope in 1926. Thus it was only to be expected that a book by Bernanos, inspired by the Spanish Civil War, would at least echo the staunch support that Maurras and his followers were giving General Franco. Yet *Les grands cimetières* was not only bitterly critical of Franco and the