

CRIME AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN THE NOVELS OF BERNANOS

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THE posthumously published *Un mauvais Rêve*, recently translated into English,¹ adds a third murderer to those with whom we have already become acquainted in the novels of Bernanos published in his lifetime. Certain basic features are common to them all. The words of Abbé Donissan to Mouchette in *Sous le Soleil de Satan* would seem to apply to all three: '*Vous êtes comme un jouet, vous êtes comme la petite balle d'un enfant, entre les mains de Satan*'.² They are all victims of demoniacal possession. They are therefore victims in a deeper sense than are the unfortunate persons whom they murder, more or less gratuitously. The murder they commit is but the exterior manifestation of the deep corruption within, a corruption which in each case has its origin in childhood, indeed farther back still, in the blood which they have inherited. '*Vous n'êtes point devant Dieu coupable de ce meurtre*', says Abbé Donissan to Mouchette,³ and with the terrible insight that he has acquired in his grim encounter of the preceding night he reveals her vicious antecedents. The 'communion of sinners' of which the curé of Ambricourt wrote in his diary⁴ is strong and has deep and wide ramifications. When the sham priest of Mégère, Evangéline, is awaiting the train that will presumably decapitate her, the author adds his thoughts to hers and evokes the sin of her mother, in whose false position as a defrocked nun with an illegitimate child and in whose sacerdotal obsession her own aberration had its origin.⁵ In *Un crime* there is no priest of supernatural vision to read back into the past, but we may legitimately assume that the weight of heredity oppresses Evangéline no less

¹ *Night is Darkest*. Translated from the French by W. J. Strachan. (The Bodley Head; 10s. 6d.)

² *Sous le Soleil de Satan* (Paris, Plon, 1926), p. 203.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁴ *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (Paris, Plon, 1936), p. 172.

⁵ *Un crime* (Paris, Plon, 1935), pp. 243-4.

than Mouchette and it is abundantly clear that in her and through her the 'communion of sinners' exercises its cancerous action. In *Un mauvais Rêve* the whole of the first part exists to provide the background of unwitting but no less responsible accomplices in the murder that Mme Alfieri subsequently commits.

The sign of the evil by which these women are possessed is falsehood. '*Quand j'étais petite*', says Mouchette to the doctor whose mistress she is and whose element also is falsehood, '*je mentais souvent sans plaisir. A présent, c'est plus fort que moi.*'⁶ In one of the unposted letters to the woman she loves, Evangéline writes:

*Oui, j'ai aimé le mensonge. Non pas ce mensonge utilitaire, cette forme abjecte du mensonge qui n'est qu'un moyen de défense comme un autre, employé à regret, honteusement. . . . J'ai aimé le mensonge, et il me l'a bien rendu. Il m'a donné la seule liberté dont je pouvais jouir sans contrainte, car si la vérité délivre, elle met à notre délivrance des conditions trop dures à mon orgueil, et le mensonge n'en impose aucune. Seulement il finit par tuer. Il me tue.*⁷

Falsehood has assumed in her a supreme manifestation, the usurpation of the sacerdotal role of the priest she has killed. The unbelieving priest of *L'Imposture*, continuing to conform outwardly to the condition of his vocation, is the other example in the work of Bernanos of the extremity of falsehood. In *Un mauvais Rêve* the author once more makes the diagnosis of this corrupt condition. Of Mme Alfieri he writes:

*Mais elle était de celles, moins rares qu'on ne pense, qui aiment le mensonge pour lui-même, en usent avec une prudence et une clairvoyance profondes, et d'ailleurs ne l'apprécient que lorsque le vrai et le faux s'y mêlent si étroitement qu'ils ne font qu'un, vivent de leur vie propre, font dans la vie une autre vie.*⁸

In a later passage he says of her lies that they had arisen

⁶ *Sous le Soleil de Satan*, p. 69.

⁷ *Un crime*, p. 231.

⁸ *Un mauvais Rêve* (Paris, Plon, 1951), p. 193.

out of her very substance; like the foul proliferations of cancer, they were her substance.⁹

Either this falsehood in its cancerous penetration will destroy its victim utterly or, if it is itself destroyed, it must seem that the death of the victim will follow closely, for the cancer has eaten too deeply; though in the latter case there is the chance that in the moments before death truth may take possession. The victim herself is impotent to perform the operation, which requires the special skill of the Bernanosian priest, his insight and his spiritual strength. Even then there is the danger of despair, for, bereft of this malignant growth which has been her pride and which has been the substance on which she has fed, the victim may acquire but the lucidity to be conscious of the void in herself and of the void only. Whatever the appearances, however, the last words uttered by the curé of Ambricourt, '*Tout est grâce*', cryptic as they are, are perhaps meant to be heard each time there occurs in the work of Bernanos one of those possibly too frequent suicides.

In the ultimate resolution of the mendacious lives of these women, the murder they commit plays a varying part. It is however, in all cases, a vital role. The criminal act, purely symptomatic as it is, seems nevertheless to precipitate the final issue, the question as to who is to enter into lasting possession of the soul, God or the Devil. Mouchette's murder of the man whose child she has conceived is unpremeditated, in a sense accidental. She is, however, attached to her crime, proud of her evil achievement. It is this pride that Abbé Donissan destroys when he deprives her of individual guilt, indeed of all that she has regarded as her individual distinction, the basic lie that she has fabricated or that has been fabricated in her. Emptied of the illusion she has cherished, she cannot of herself fill the void within her, she cannot rise alone to the height where the priest lifted her and it is in the possession of Satan that she slits her throat. That the wound is not immediately fatal is no doubt the final act of grace, from which the merits of Abbé Donissan are not to be dissociated, and in her dying wish to be carried

⁹ Ibid., p. 244.

to church we are clearly meant to see the sign of her salvation.

Mouchette's crime serves the twofold purpose of providing the girl herself with a secret onto which her pride can fasten and of presenting the priest with a weapon with which to subdue her. It is essentially through her crime that he attacks her, that he attacks the evil which possesses her. This crime, then, is vital to the soul's eternal destiny, no less than is the action of the priest. In the final phase of this drama Bernanos brings closely together the act of despair and the action of grace. It is an uneasy juxtaposition. Moreover, in a work of fiction the intervention of grace at the last minute, even when associable with the supernatural power of a priest, is apt to appear as a *coup de théâtre* of the author, providing him in too facile a manner with a consolatory *dénouement*. Obviously, it would have been a gross simplification for the priest to have succeeded in tearing away the nucleus of falsehood and in substituting the love of God at the same time. The suicide is plausible enough. We cannot in fact imagine Mouchette living to a ripe old age in the practice of good works, but the literary critic may find insufficient inevitability in the melodramatic ending to this episode. The death of the other Mouchette, in *Nouvelle Histoire de Mouchette*, is more aesthetically satisfactory. However, the episode of the first Mouchette must be seen mainly in its relation to the life of the *curé* of Lumbres. Between the girl and the priest there is a mysterious affinity and we cannot assess what either owes to the other.

The first murder committed by Evangéline in *Un crime* is as unpremeditated as Mouchette's. So indeed is the second, which is an unforeseen consequence of the first; but the second murder involves sacrilege and it gives Evangéline the opportunity of playing the most mendacious role of all, the impersonation of a priest. From this situation there is no issue but death, which Evangéline is sure to enter, as she writes herself: '*sous un faux visage et sous un faux nom*'.¹⁰ By killing the priest and assuming his cassock it may be implied that she has effectively cut herself off from any redeeming action

¹⁰ *Un crime*, p. 237.

such as that exercised by Abbé Donissan in *Sous le Soleil de Satan*. The part played by Abbé Etchegoyen is ambiguous, but its only discernible effect is to make up her mind that the time has come to end her life, which she does calmly and impenitently. It is difficult to draw the conclusion from her dealings with the altar boy that the purity of her intention in regard to him is an effective counter-weight to her crime, for, albeit unwittingly, she drives him to suicide. The impression left by this novel is of evil unleashed, the impression made even more powerfully by *Monsieur Ouine*, which was composed in the same period of the novelist's life. In neither novel does the power of evil appear to be effectively opposed. The dying words of the *curé* of Ambricourt may perhaps be applied retrospectively to the earlier works of Bernanos, but *Un crime* and *Monsieur Ouine* seem to imply a viewpoint very different and equally extreme.¹¹

The double murder committed by Evangéline is the prelude to a rampant disorder which culminates in her self-destruction. As in the case of Mouchette, the murder is symptomatic and it also precipitates the final issue, but this time the spiritual tussle is absent and the outcome is despair. The 'communion of sinners' would appear to be triumphant. There remains for me to consider Mme Alfieri's crime in *Un mauvais Rêve*. Unlike the others, this is premeditated, and the instrument of it is a more mature woman, more lucid than either Mouchette or Evangéline.¹² It is despair which drives her to her crime:

Le désespoir seul avait pu l'amener jusque-là—un désespoir dont elle n'avait eu qu'à de rares minutes, une claire conscience—désespoir sans cause et sans objet précis, d'autant plus redoutable qu'il s'était lentement infiltré en

¹¹ *Un crime* is a 'thriller' and should not perhaps be taken too seriously. The events narrated are devoid of verisimilitude. Nevertheless, the Bernanosian preoccupations underlie the whole story.

¹² Mme Alfieri is also called Evangéline, but for the sake of clarity I shall refer to her only by her surname. The same names constantly recur in the novels of Bernanos, as if to stress the fundamental similarity of different persons. A simpler and no less plausible explanation might attribute this repetition to the indifference of the writer to secondary considerations.

*elle, imprégnant ainsi qu'un poison subtil chaque fibre de sa chair, courant à travers ses veines avec son sang.*¹³

Her crime is an act of self-assertion, to compensate her for her life of failure and humiliation. Murder is flattering to her pride, it enables her to make her feeble mark upon the world:

*De tous les moyens qu'elle avait imaginés pour sa délivrance, le crime restait le dernier à sa portée, à la mesure de sa révolte impuissante.*¹⁴

Once the crime is committed, Mme Alfieri realises that it was in hatred of herself that she murdered the old woman:

*Elle s'était haïe dès l'enfance, d'abord à son insu, puis avec une ambition sournoise, hypocrite, l'espèce de sollicitude effroyable dont une empoisonneuse peut entourer la victime qu'elle se propose d'immoler un jour.*¹⁵

Murder for her is a manner of suicide, a form which allows her a brief respite before death. The criminal act induces in her a short-lived euphoria. It is in fact cathartic, in the same way as the murder committed by Gabriel Gradère in M. Mauriac's *Les Anges noirs*. Mme Alfieri's criminal deed in itself achieves for her the destruction of illusion that it required Abbé Donissan to bring about in Mouchette. There is no possibility of return to the old mendacious life. In *Un mauvais Rêve*, however, the final phase of the drama on the supernatural level is not played out to its close. The *dénouement* is only implied in the woman's seemingly chance encounter for the second time with the unknown priest who so strangely disturbs her. The novel ends with the words: '*Une seule chance lui restait peut-être, reconnaître sa funèbre puissance, s'avouer vaincue. . .*'. It is the hint of ultimate salvation with which the novels of M. Mauriac so frequently end. We foresee that this priest may have the power to achieve Mme Alfieri's total submission to the will of God, but nothing is certain. Both the melodrama of Mouchette's death and the unrelieved despair of the Evangéline of *Un crime* are thus avoided. It is an ending which offends against neither aesthetic nor religious considerations.

¹³ *Un mauvais Rêve*, p. 233.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

The word '*peut-être*' in that last sentence gives us all the uncertainty we require.

It has been my intention merely to show that there are in the treatment of crime by Bernanos certain constant factors placed in a varying relationship. The sole object of his portrayal of crime is to reveal its supernatural aspect. The crime is a symptom and behind each life whose fundamental falsehood, previously hidden, is ultimately manifested in this way, is the power of Satan. Yet, through the very crime which is the only exterior manifestation of evil the victory of God may be finally assured. These women are plainly depicted as victims, the victims of Satan. Yet, in the case of Mouchette, at least, whom Abbé Donissan calls 'a plaything in the hands of Satan', she ultimately *wills*, even if without knowing what she is doing, the presence of the Devil.¹⁶ Even so, she dies apparently in the desire of God. It may seem that Bernanos does not always set much store by the freedom of man's will and that he tends to approach too near to a Manichean dualism. His emphases and omissions are easy enough to perceive. One can hardly expect from a novelist, however, a vision which is theologically complete, without individual partiality. What is, I think, indisputable is that no other French novelist of his time surpasses him in spiritual intensity and insight. None has illustrated more effectively that memorable aphorism from *Une saison en enfer*: '*Le combat spirituel est aussi brutal que la bataille d'hommes; mais la vision de la justice est le plaisir de Dieu seul*'.

¹⁶ *Sous le Soleil de Satan*, p. 221.