

THE VISION OF JOY: A STUDY OF GEORGES BERNANOS

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IF a man could take his shadow and accept it not merely as a sign of himself written by the sun but as an essential part of himself, he might begin to understand something of the mystery of prayer and poetry, suffering and surrender, religion and imagery. This is what Georges Bernanos, the recently dead French novelist, has tried to do. He is not a poet, except at those moments when his novels reach the limits of prose and cry for a barer and simpler statement; nor is he a mystic in the sense that he is trying to depict his own religious experiences directly. But that he has something of the mystic in him is evident both from the subjects he selects and the way in which he treats them. In his novel *Joy*, he is concerned with the terrifying experiences of a young visionary. Here, the visionary is seen as something very like a victim, a bearer-away of the sufferings which other men refuse. She confronts evil, even accepts it, yet she does not let it overwhelm her. In one of the later chapters of this novel, Bernanos describes Chantal's surrender to God:

'For at present, the idea, the certainty of her impotence had become the dazzling centre of her joy, the core of the flaming star. It was by that very impotence that she felt herself united to the still invisible Master, it was that humiliated portion of her soul that had plunged into the abyss of suavity. Slowly, with infinite precaution, she amorously completed the consumption of that scattered light; she concentrated its rays at a single point of her being as though she hoped to pierce the last obstacle and through the breach to lose herself in God. For another little moment the waters were still. Then the flamboyant wave began gently, insidiously to recede, scattering its foam everywhere. The pain appeared again like the black tooth of a reef between two columns of spray, but now stripped of all other feelings, reduced to its essence, smooth and bare indeed like a rock worn away by the waves. By this sign Chantal knew that the last stage had been passed, her humble sacrifice accepted, and that the anguish of the past hours, the doubts and even her remorse, had now been engulfed in the prodigious compassion of God.'

She dared not move, nor even lower her wide-open eyes, fixed on the same point of the wall, a little below her crucifix. She felt plainly the fatigue of her knees, her back, the weight of the nape of her neck, that sort of hardening of the eyeballs that paralysed her gaze. And yet her suffering no longer belonged to her, she could no longer contain it; it was like an effusion, outside her own shattered, annihilated flesh, of the precious blood of another heart. "I possess nothing now", she thought with a joy still naïve but yet august and solemn, and that she wanted to hug to her breast as though it had been the sublime fruit of her extraordinary union. "If it were His will I could die." "

This needs a close examination; first, there are the familiar images of mystical writing—the waters, the rocks, the lights, the blood, the attributes and activities of profane love. Second, there is the sense of concentration, the desire not to move or be moved, not even to flicker an eyelash. Then there is the sense of consummation, not of the flesh but expressed in terms of the flesh. Finally, there is felt the limpness and poverty of language, yet still the necessity to speak. We are reminded of Wittgenstein's final painful succumbing to silence because words only meant nonsense. We are reminded, too, of all things brought to a standstill, that subjective yet valid peace which Augustine knew when he spoke with his mother at Ostia—that solemn sense of order and tranquillity which the poet has an inkling of when he has completed a poem which he knows to be good. We recall Brémond's remark about poets having to rationalize their experiences, to ask questions and to find answers, so that the finished poem falls perilously but certainly somewhere between the questions and the answers.

Bernanos has, in fact, in the form of a perfectly conventional novel described the exaltation and the agony which many mystics, of various centuries and countries, have also striven to describe. But with him there is this vital difference—they have been depicting their own feelings and thoughts, whereas he has projected what must certainly have been part of his own experience into the life of an imaginary character. And here we reach the difficult and much-disputed question of the place of imagination in mystical experience; and I mean here not imagination as a source of deception but as an instrument of knowledge itself.

Imagination is the very ground of the life of the poet—‘the shaping spirit of imagination’, Wordsworth called it. But with the mystics it has always been slightly suspect. Even the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* gave it a very low place, among the experiences of the senses, in his exploration of the higher reaches of prayer. And yet, released from its adherence to sensual things, may not the imagination itself be an approach to prayer, even a means to it? Many writers on the spiritual life have admitted the uses of the imaginative faculty in preparing the mind for ultimate union with God; but I mean something much more profound and far-reaching than this—in short, the possibility of the participation of the purified imagination in the very act of surrender to God. For there seem to be moments when the poet is *given* some intuition of truth through the channel of the imagination and through *no other channel*. This, certainly, seems to be implicit in Bernanos’s attitude to prayer, as well as in Péguy’s, and, to move further back in time, in Traherne’s and Herbert’s. May it not be that mystical writers, fearful of the traps and charms of the imagination, have tried to omit it from their systems while still using it to *formulate* their systems? It may be argued that to grant validity to imagination in one sphere of experience is not necessarily to do so in others; but if the imagination can be employed both in the early stages of prayer and also in the *expression* of the highest forms of mystical experience, it is difficult to deny it a good deal of importance in the total approach to God. Imagination, certainly, may sometimes be a perilous intruder in the mystic’s experience, but it is, without doubt, the *only* faculty that proffers the method and materials to re-create that experience. Coleridge understood this perfectly when, in Chapter XIII of his *Biographia Literaria*, he defined the function of the Primary and the Secondary Imagination:

‘The imagination, then, I consider either as primary or secondary. The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing in the conscious will, yet still identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create: or where the

process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (*as objects*) are essentially fixed and dead.'

This passage raises many abstruse questions, questions of a fundamentally philosophical character. What is relevant in it to a study of Bernanos's approach to the mystical experience is the stress that is laid on the power of the imagination. The author of *The Cloud*, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross would certainly not agree in assigning so lofty a place to man's imaginative faculty; Teresa, in particular, was only too well aware of the potential dangers of this faculty, but this was certainly partly because she had a very strong imagination herself and therefore knew its perils by personal experience. On the other hand, even so austere and ascetic a man as John of the Cross encouraged his readers and spiritual charges to seek out hills or mountainous places when they wished to pray, because he regarded such scenery as conducive to prayer ('I have lifted up my eyes unto the hills'). However, it would be to make a complete travesty of his work to suggest that his attitude towards the imagination was anything remotely like that of Coleridge. Indeed, he said, in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*:

'The two powers of imagination and fancy serve for meditation, which is a discursive act by means of imagery, forms, and figures, wrought in the senses. . . . All these imaginations and apprehensions are to be emptied out of the soul, which must remain in darkness so far as it concerns the senses, in order that we may attain to the divine union, because they bear no proportion to the proximate means of union with God.'

We should not forget, however, that in his *Spiritual Canticle*, St John employs the almost erotic imagery of the Song of Songs to convey the experience of complete union with God:

'Let us rejoice, O my Beloved!
Let us go forth to see ourselves in Thy beauty.
To the mountain and the hill,
Where the pure water flows:
Let us enter into the heart of the thicket.'

While he certainly believed that the imagination is a positive impediment to true mystical union, it is evident from his own verse that he was perfectly prepared to entrust to the imagination the task of expressing that union. His poetry is not a denial of his

convictions but it is the liberator and exonerator of his imagination. In a word, even John of the Cross was not prepared to say that mystical experience was totally inexpressible, but rather that poetry might provide glimpses or echoes of it. The imagery he employed for this purpose was warmly sensuous and often nakedly physical.

Bernanos was, then, in the orthodox Western tradition when he described Chantal's union with God in amorous terms. He was in the same tradition when he spoke of her suffering: 'Thus Chantal thought that her peace was still intact, her joy untarnished, when already the mysterious wound had opened from which flowed a more human, a more carnal charity, revealing God in man . . .'. The suffering essential for the visionary is here indicated, and also the necessity for a complete participation in Christ's Incarnation. It is also noticeable in this book that when Bernanos attempts to describe Chantal's experience of prayer, his language becomes extremely intense, tends, indeed, almost towards the condition of poetry or, at least, towards the condition of the prose poem.

The title of this novel, *Joy*, is well-chosen and does, I believe, give an insight into Bernanos's prevailing subject-matter—joy attained not through ignorance but through innocence and suffering. He is a writer who has sometimes been misunderstood and critics have tended to see him simply as an explorer of the darkest parts of man's nature, as, perhaps, a more exalted Mauriac. And it is true that Bernanos has written of evil more subtly and more profoundly than any other twentieth-century novelist. But this acute sense of evil is only the reverse side of an exquisite sense of innocence. All his heroes and heroines possess knowledge, if not experience, of evil, and Bernanos makes it clear that his characters could never attain sanctity without such knowledge. Chantal, in *Joy*, and the young priest in *Diary of a Country Priest*, appear to be victims, but they are not, in the usual sense, victims at all. They are not passive; their surrenders are adamant and active, essentially matters of choice. Suffering has clarified their intuitions and insights ('Can any understanding of evil', asks Bernanos, 'equal insight into pain? Is there anything that can go beyond pity?'); and, if they are not always children in years, they all have a childlike humility and understanding—the kind of audacious trust and faith that possessed Traherne and Péguy. In

Diary of a Country Priest, the holy, uncouth Curé de Torcy speaks of this blazing innocence thus:

‘Childhood and old age should be the two greatest trials of mankind. But that very sense of powerlessness is the mainspring of a child’s joy. . . . The shabbiest tuppenny doll will rejoice a baby’s heart for half the year, but your mature gentleman’ll go yawning his head off at a five-hundred franc gadget. And why? Because he has lost the soul of childhood. Well, God has entrusted the Church to keep that soul alive, to safeguard our candour and freshness.’

It is worth noting that Bernanos’s saints, for that is what Chantal and the young country priest are, are often misunderstood by the men and women they live with. Chantal is regarded by her family as a totally inexperienced and perhaps backward girl, while the young priest is thought by his parish to be either a fool or a drunkard. This is because their sufferings, their ‘dark nights’ are entirely interior events; their battlefields are their own souls. Only a similar innocence and inwardness (something very different from self-absorption or mere introspection) can recognize such simplicity and so Chantal’s and the priest’s closest relationships with other people are on a level where only truth and honesty can survive and where even the mildest pretence is a betrayal. In the marvellous episode in *Diary of a Country Priest* when the young priest quite literally saves the soul of the despairing, disillusioned Countess, the drama of their contact is terrible because it is so bare. We are more accustomed to the heroic gesture, the tragic stance or the defiant snapping of the fingers at fate; we are ill at ease in a world of acceptance, an acceptance which, like Eliot’s simplicity, ‘costs not less than everything’. The priest speaks of evil and hell itself to the Countess in the following uncompromising terms:

‘Hell is judged by the standards of the world, and hell is not of this world, it is of the other world, and still less of this Christian society. An eternal expiation ——! The miracle is that we on earth were ever able to think of such a thing, when scarcely has our sin gone out of us, and one look, a sign, a dumb appeal suffices for grace and pardon to swoop down, as an eagle from topmost skies. It’s because the lowest of human beings, even though he no longer thinks he can love, still has in *him* the power of loving. . . . Hell is not to love any more.’

The eloquence here is of the same kind which was so apparent in Bernanos's account of Chantal's apprehension of God. And, in *Joy*, it is Chantal's death and submission that are responsible for the salvation of the Abbé Cénabre, the embittered, clever priest who had lost his faith, not only in God but in everything. But, before her death, she joins battle with him in words wrung from the torment of her own faith and simplicity:

'Even if I were to die in ten minutes, I should want to have our Lord's permission first, like a child, no, not even a child—like an innocent little animal that takes its last breathful of airs, its last drink of cool water, and walks to its death at the heels of its master. The master holds the leash, one only has to follow. . . . From now on what difference does it make whether I am sane or insane, a saint or a visionary, or even whether I am surrounded by angels or devils—nothing can take me any farther out of my path than the length of the leash!'

In this spiritual combat, Bernanos employs every kind of image and symbol; his most simple characters are given the gift of tongues; language itself becomes something august, and almost sacramental. More important still, it is from prayer and from the uniqueness of a personal vision that his characters take their power and authority. Their experience is shared with and distributed to other men and thus gives a double sense to the word 'mystical' in the Christian conception of the 'Mystical Body of Christ'.

The world of Georges Bernanos is a world from which nothing has been omitted. His characters gaze with wide-open eyes at everything, from lust and horror to peace and happiness. Nothing is omitted but, paradoxically, the effect of his writing is one of starkness and essence. Everything has been considered and everything is compressed and integrated, in these two novels, into the vision of a single character. But that vision is itself a burning thing and reduces to ashes everything that is not vital and necessary. Bernanos's heroes and heroines bear the mark of the chosen victim and they are sent into their own wildernesses carrying, like men hurrying from a city on fire, only what is essential for life. But Chantal and the country priest bear the load of what is necessary not only for their own lives and salvation but also what is necessary for all mankind's.

A subsidiary theme in Bernanos's work is that of *exchange*; in

his script called *The Fearless Heart* which was intended for filming and which is concerned with some Carmelite nuns at the time of the French Revolution, the terrified young novice finds in her own martyrdom the courage which her Reverend Mother lost on her death-bed. This profoundly Christian theme (so different from Scobie's bargaining with God in *The Heart of the Matter*) has another modern counterpart in the fiction of the late Charles Williams, though Williams is more concerned with good and evil than in the attainment of the ecstatic joy which obsesses Bernanos. Yet both writers are referring to Christ's words, 'Greater love than this hath no man—that a man lay down his life for his friends'. With Bernanos this command, for it is more a command than an aphorism, is carried into the heart of the profoundest spiritual experience. But his characters do more than suffer on behalf of others; they also hand over *joy* to others, even a joy they may never have known fully themselves. His young priest's agonizing cry echoes through all Bernanos's work—'The miracle of the empty hands—that we can give what we do not possess'. And this is something very like John of the Cross's *Nada* and *Toda*, nothingness and everything. 'He that seeks to lose his life shall find it.' It is this finding, whose object is joy, that is Bernanos's prevailing theme and obsession; and it is a perilous search because it is concerned with man's life at its most intimate and profound point. He puts a rich and awed imagination at the service of a total vision of life. And even in moments of the acutest darkness and deprivation he can assert that 'Grace is everywhere'.