GEORGES BERNANOS AND CHRISTIAN EXISTENTIALISM

by

Zaven G. Azarian

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INTRODUCTION

To study Georges Bernanos is to study the meaning of human anguish--anguish which in its spiritual form becomes the cornerstone of love, hope and grace. Spiritual anguish in its Christian form and love in its Agapé, meaning self-giving love, demonstrate the values of a Christian Existentialist of the middle twentieth century. Bernanos tries to answer in his novels the question of whether man will or will not be able to face what surrounds him.

Bernanos describes and portrays man as Nothingness. However he intensely focuses on man as a Being. His novels are full of nihilistic ideas and evil characters who are always in perspective from self-fulfillment to self-destruction. Bernanos uses the philosophy of Nothingness from a Christian existentialist's point of view; for him it is not the biological destruction but the destruction of an identity which preoccupies the spiritual existence of a human being.

> Pour le non-croyant, la mort est le retour à un néant en quelque sorte biologique. Pour le croyant, elle est la chute possible dans le Néant ontologique ... rupture avec l'Etre, extériorité absolue de l'Etre.[1]

One of the central themes of this study will be the ontological Nothingness of Bernanos, which is based upon and is close to faith, love and anguish. For without them Nothingness penetrates into the life of men, who exist without existence.

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[1]Dina Dreyfus, "Imposture et Authenticité dans l'oeuvre de Bernanos," Mercure de France, XXXVI (May, 1950), 49.

In his novels Bernanos defends, as does Jean-Paul Sartre, the Particular against the Universal. But the Particular has a Being (which Sartre negates). The Being of Bernanos labels him as a Christian Existentialist full of Kierkegaardian and Jasperian philosophies.

Bernanos is, however, more concerned than any other Christian Existentialist about the human condition as such and about the singularity of the individual. His protest is specifically religious and Christian. The suffering "guilty" creatures of the novels of Bernanos protest against the dissolution of their substance either through speculation or through objectivity or through so-called social progress. It is Bernanos' thought against objectivity that labels this French novelist as "homme d'angoisse, homme du calvaire."

Self-estrangement is for Bernanos primarily a process going on in one's self, not an external, but an internal relation, based on one's own attitude toward oneself. Bernanos therefore becomes the psychologist or rather the psychopathologist of self-estrangement. He heralds the Age of Anxiety by describing, especially in Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne, the state of alienation as anxiety.

But anxiety, or in French angoisse, seems to be better, for it is opposed to fear. Fear in its spiritual meaning refers to something definite, as in Mouchette, whose fear is based on a definite action, killing the Comte.

Angoisse, however, refers to something indefinite. It is the uncanny apprehension of some impending evil, as in Sous le Soleil de Satan, of something not present, but to come; of something not within us, but of an alien power. In Sous le Soleil de Satan this sort of

alienation finds a most profound and penetrating psychological analysis--as being dominated in a state of angoisse by an alien power which threatens the Curé's dissolution.

Bernanos goes one step further in his novels and he analyzes angoisse as a joyful internal happening within oneself in his Dialogues des Carmelites. Bernanos transforms the internal fear of Soeur Blanche de l'Angoisse du Christ to an angoisse, an angoisse of Agapé, where Agapé conquers the angoisse of death and transforms Soeur Blanche into a "saint."

Bernanos' angoisse is sometimes transformed into despair, and despair is the sickness unto death. Such is the case of M. Ouine, where a vegetable is living in despair heading towards Nothingness or biological death where the Being is obviously missing. According to Bernanos, whoever has no God or Being has no self, and whoever has no self is in despair.

The personal character of Bernanos enlightens dramatically the union of the territories of Nothingness and Being. The person who ventures into metaphysical lightlessness is at some point in the process hard to distinguish from the person who looks back victorious after salvation or saltus into pure illumination. The person who becomes does so only after deteriorating near Nothingness. Then he knows Nothingness forever from having been very close. Whether the major Bernanos character sees himself as being-toward-Nothingness or as being-toward-Being, or confuses and hesitates in such a distinction, Bernanos the existential novelist unconsciously desires to reach out and push man toward Being, with words. He manifests his desire by way of artificial

theological appurtenances in the novels, ushering in grâce, joie éternelle and fullness of Being. It is in this setting that operates the visible trend of many major characters toward metaphysical distraction.

Bernanos places Woman on a high platform. Woman is the symbol of life who relates Being and Nothingness in the life of an individual. She is the pathway and portal, commonplace but mysterious cause of destiny. She can be paradoxical, overlapping in functions, as in Journal d'un Curé de Campagne, where the mistress is continuously the cause of duFréty's ruin and of the curé d'Ambicourt's final insights into holiness.

Seen from an existentialist angle, she is important and significant as a character of singular destiny as Mouchette in Sous le Soleil de Satan. Whether she is a duFrety's mistress or a Mouchette, she is continuously the obsessed human being by means of whom Bernanos leads men to places and circumstances where self-destruction or self-fulfillment comes suddenly and finally. Woman is considered by Bernanos as the dark, sweet call to Nothingness and the splendid light at the threshold of Being.

The theological Agapé engraves its real meaning in the heart of this splendid light and transforms the Nothingness into Being, or from a Christian existentialist point of view, it transforms from a general happiness to a specific, particular, happy individual. Agapé is seen as the theological term for the obverse love of Father and Son, and its extension through grace into the human. Agapé sanctifies and illuminates Eros, as woman illuminates both Nothingness and Being. In Agapé the person is in harmony with himself and his human environment, even though

a Christian existentialist philosopher will say he may be consumed by that environment. He might be exploited, hated, ignored, brutalized; still he remains to pour himself out in love (Agapé) without losing himself.

The following pages will attempt primarily to share the discovery that existence in the novels of Bernanos is a sublime particularization of the theology of Agapé.

According to Bernanos, if man is to be, he must love--not erotically, not egotistically, not with a suicidal abandon, but with the understanding and grace of Agapé. If he is to have this understanding and grace he must become as a person who exists just for love, as a child. If he is to become as a child he must remain as one with himself from the day of his existence, from his childhood. What he is must surge from "un point situé ... sur la ligne d'existence ... d'un temps jeune, frais, intact ..."[2]

Christian existence has three faces in the novels of Bernanos: a link with identity, hence with hope, for even the most pathetic or negative character; a time of self-commitment to great evil or great goodness; and finally, a love in wisdom, Agapé, which his saints practice continually.

The loss of existence through Nothingness is fully developed in Bernanos' first novel, Sous le Soleil de Satan, and also in his almost last novel, Monsieur Ouine. Both novels contain a rather radical departure concerning human existence and human freedom. Here a person

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[2]Georges Poulet, "Le Temps d'un Eclair," La Nouvelle Revue Française, LII (August, 1964), 260.

can pursue personal refinement and personal intensification. I hope to share the discovery of Christian Existentialism almost hidden in the novels of this great writer.

Bernanos tries to explain the existence of a world that consists of an inescapable disintegration of hatred, which is the chaotic night of Nothingness. Yet he also explains a world alive with the anticipation of love, the collectivity of human fulfillment and the existence of a Being. For him this means a passing across the world, the commanded atmosphere of sympathy, that can only proceed from Agapé.

In his novels it is the Christian Existence or the Being that holds to this otherwise impossible love.

CHAPTER I

LOVE AND ANGOISSE: MOUCHETTE, THE CHRISTIAN EXISTENTIALIST

Throughout the novels of Bernanos the reader gets well acquainted with the philosophy of negativity, darkness and moreover, with psychological and physical self-destruction, murder and despair. Nevertheless, love plays an important part also, because love displays the different values of various Bernanos characters. Although love helps the condemned characters to see the Being, nevertheless it also introduces the reality of l'angoisse.

Love and anguish are well illustrated in Georges Bernanos' first novel, Sous le Soleil de Satan, where love and hatred, God and the demon, are in constant struggle. As Georges Poulet says, "night meets light, Mouchette's soul and Donissan's salvation."[1] This chapter will suggest the saving compassion of the novelist in dealing with characters for whom he tends to bear self-destruction forced between two strong powers of love and hatred. It is interesting to note the vast influence of Mouchette's life on Bernanos' seven novels which followed. The constant warfare between Satan and God shows the theological values of Agapé, or Being, reversed by Nothingness or self-destruction.

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[1]Georges Poulet, "Le Temps d'un Eclair," La Nouvelle Revue Française, LII (August, 1964), 262.

In this first novel are the subminiatures of the world Bernanos saw surrounding him. Here we find the greedy challenging adolescent, the saintly priest as a substitute, the false priest as scientist, the bourgeois bien-pensant, and the mediocre writer.

Mouchette's story begins with a philosophy towards annihilation. It begins at sunset, a time of "solitude immense ... , glacée ... , pleine d'un silence liquide," with "une essence secrète ... empoisonnée."[2] We could see the appearance of Satan in Mouchette's physical and spiritual life.

Bernanos portrays Mouchette as a soul for whom God and Satan do battle. In this novel Satan wins, but Mouchette, bleeding to death from her own hand, is capable of a final grace-filled Christian existentialist desire to be carried to the door of the Church, where she dies.

Various critics neglect the human stability in the first Mouchette's life and label her as a Satanic power who destructs her environment, her friends and herself. But this would be rejected on the basis of her last desires, where Bernanos shows the values of grace, which encourages Mouchette to surrender herself to God or to Agapé, where her physical being transforms itself into a spiritual being of light and joy. By giving some attention to the theological principles we shall better understand Mouchette's existence and childhood as the source of her final Christian existence and victory.

Once darkness, full with negative portent, is established as the range of this darkly romantic and lonely girl, it remains for her to

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[2]Georges Bernanos, Sous le Soleil de Satan, p. 7.

be oriented toward one facet of her existence--Nothingness or Being. For Mouchette, who has produced to her "curiosité du plaisir et du risque,"[3] the favor goes rapidly toward the negative desires, when she defies her father:

> ... les dés étaient jetés, ... elle se sentait si libre, si vivante! Ce non, sur ses lèvres lui parut aussi doux et aussi amer qu'un premier baiser. C'était son premier défi.[4]

Mouchette had already enjoyed sexual liberty to a great degree, but this rejection or refusal is much more elemental in the Bernanosian process of self-destruction--free annihilation or negation, followed by a delicious sense of liberté. In this quarrel, Mouchette increases strength in insolence, concurrently realizing existence as cruel and hard. At dark, near midnight, her anger calmed, her sense of liberty having developed in solitude and darkness, she is ready and prepared for l'angoisse or "le péril et l'aventure, un beau risque,"[5] and her voice gives birth to the words of "Libre Existence."[6]

Bernanos negates fatherly love in Sous le Soleil de Satan, but demonstrates l'angoisse of Mouchette. He utilizes three images to clarify the meaning of anguish which becomes the cross of a young girl existing free without freedom. Leap, road and la brèche are the images used in the three paragraphs in which Mouchette leaves her father's home in the middle of the night; they all evoke the streaming sense of liberty in her spirit. Mouchette is ready to leap, like a young animal, onto

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[3]Ibid., p. 19.

[4]Ibid., p. 22.

[5]Ibid., p. 26.

[6]Ibid., p. 29.

"le chemin ... immense," where the night itself opens out before her "comme un asile et comme une proie ... "[7] From the moment of this liberation from "sa cruelle jeunesse,"[8] the process of Mouchette's self-destruction guides and fascinates Bernanos, who will call into play his entire range of negative images to intensify the impact of the process.

In Mouchette's drama, everything takes place in nocturnal confrontations with men, and it is evident that Bernanos has carefully arranged these confrontations to cause and to mark the stages of Mouchette's destruction. In the confrontation with her father, it is his insistence that she reveal all the circumstances of her pregnancy, the deep secret of her sexual desires, that arouses her total refusal. Bernanos' contempt for the father, whose " ... impuissance aime refléter son néant dans la souffrance d'autrui,"[9] reveals early that Mouchette's tragedy will not unfold in a vacuum of solitude.

During the hours alone after the decisive quarrel with herself, she experiences, along with the growing sense of liberty, "quelque angoisse de sa future solitude,"[10] a prime condition of the despair to come, for which the initial responsibility will be laid at the feet of an ineffectual father.

It is Mouchette's rejection of the mediocrity of her father's world that leads her to the road opening straight to night. Even before she sets out, Bernanos suggests the coming irrevocable negation

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[7] Ibid., p. 29.

[8] Ibid., p. 32.

[9] Ibid., p. 33.

[10] Ibid., p. 36.

in a passage describing Mouchette's exotic daydreams, in which she finds herself on " ... une route droite, inflexible, qui s'écarte toujours, et nul ne revient."[11] It is the impossibility of return that distinguishes the road of Mouchette's exoticism and sounds again the note of coming tragedy. This is even more striking in that it prefigures and parallels an image from a later novel: the face of death as return to the face of existence. For Bernanos the successful death is both a time of return and of transformation. It is return to the dawn which was childhood, and transformation to the threshold of a new dawn. In relation to childhood the dawn symbolizes the beginning, the anticipation of all that lies ahead in eternal victory over death. When Bernanos refers to the face of a dead person resembling that of a child, especially in its expression of calm anticipation, he recreates the dual image of the road that bears the voyager back to his starting place and at the same time leads him to another universe.

Mouchette's road into darkness leads to no dawn, either as return or as transformation in resurrection. Mouchette's "liberation" carries her straight to her first lover, the Marquis de Cadignan, whose infidelity and cowardice quickly destroy her illusions of the hope that lay in him. Bernanos links the incomprehension of both men in Mouchette's dire prediction: "Vous ne me connaissez pas, tous les deux. Va! les malheurs ne font que commencer."[12]

The parallels in Mouchette's first two encounters are given a crescendo effect when Bernanos repeats the image of the romantic

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[11] Ibid., p. 38.

[12] Ibid., p. 48.

Mouchette setting out on a fantasy voyage, returning after a short time to mediocre reality. By means of this daydreaming Mouchette suddenly sees herself trapped in permanent bourgeois respectability, after the brief and disappointing liaison with Cadignan. At this stage, though, Bernanos crashes through the reality behind the daydreaming and introduces his other universe, by means of a deeper intuition in Mouchette: " ... contre l'évidence, une voix intérieure mille fois plus nette et plus sure, témoignait de l'écroulement du passé, d'un vast horizon découvert ... "[13] Mouchette will not return to mediocre reality. By means of this voix intérieure Bernanos clearly initiates the second phase of Mouchette's disintegration, and links the process with severance from her past.

During the night with the marquis, Mouchette's loss of childhood existence is twice referred to obliquely by means of physical actions that resemble those of a child. She sits on the edge of a chair "en petite fille"[14] and her neck is swollen with "un sanglot d'enfant."[15] But spiritual actions mark her real state of existence. The key to her liberation from her father was defiance. She now conquers the marquis by means of the lie. Before her defiance, she merely daydreamed. Now she lies, and with immediate success, convincing the marquis that blame for her pregnancy was her father's means of ridiculing the village débauché.

As the marquis chokes on his anger, Mouchette's head fills with

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[13] Ibid., p. 52.

[14] Ibid., p. 58.

[15] Ibid., p. 59.

"mille mensonges, une infinité de mensonges ... "[16] On this night the lie is the milestone on her road straight to nothing, " ... elle eut menti pour mentir."

At the end of this second confrontation, to which her delicious sense of liberation has led her, Mouchette kills Cadignan with his own rifle and disappears into the night.

Defiance and the lie are set in motion by the father and the lover, who are the more reprehensible not so much for the mediocrity and cowardice they share, but for their failure to understand. It is their failure that isolates Mouchette on her nocturnal path. As she proceeds, we become aware of a respect, almost an awe, for her person, on the part of the author. This is much more evident as her hunger for absolutes is set in relief against the non-men who mark the stages of her descent.

As she links the first two men in their failure to understand, so will the last two men be linked, through their priestly understanding. Not that her path is to be altered; rather it is to be pursued even more swiftly and irrevocably.

The third confrontation is with Mouchette's second lover, the middle-aged liberal savant, Doctor Gallet. In the first confrontation Bernanos likens Mouchette to a young existing animal. In the second, he likens her to an existing little girl. In both he is careful to insist on her having left her childhood existence behind. But so far there is only a hint of any insanity, when she pulls the trigger of the Marquis' rifle in the final moment of terror and anger.

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[16] Ibid., p. 65.

When the night with Gallet begins, Mouchette is dressed in black for the first time, suggesting a deepening negation in solitude. The confrontation is punctuated by her laughter, a human action employed by Bernanos with hair-raising effectiveness in depicting extremely evil characters. By the end of the night with Gallet, this laughter, " ... hélas! chaque jour plus tendu, plus dur,"[17] reaches disturbingly into the scientist's understanding: "Gallet reconnut ce rire, et blémit."[18]

The confrontation is also punctuated by Mouchette's progressively deeper reveries, the first of which the doctor interprets as a brief seizure, the last desperately, as "une crise de démence furieuse ... "[19]

Bernanos intends the laughter and the seizures to dramatize the stages of Mouchette's abdication to despair, and to prepare for the entry into her soul of another person. Gallet brings her to the threshold of that abdication during the confrontation, in which Mouchette loves, tells the truth, and despairs, in that order, vis-à-vis Gallet, in the following framework of interaction:

(1) Mouchette loves this contemptible man because, as she tells him, " ... j'étais justement tombée tout en bas, à ton niveau."[20] She has earlier confided to him her tendency to self-destruction, in terms of physical falling, " ... de se laisser tomber, glisser, ... d'aller jusqu'en bas, ... tout à fait, jusqu'au fond ... "[21] At this stage her

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[17] Ibid., p. 75.

[18] Ibid., p. 76.

[19] Ibid., p. 54.

[20] Ibid., p. 62.

[21] Ibid., p. 67.

self-hatred is still expressed in terms of love, albeit of opening out to an equally hateful partner.

(2) She tells him the truth. In fact, she assures him that he is the only person now low enough to be able to receive her truth. As she confesses in detail her murder of Cadignan, Gallet, unable to accept this degree of complicity, pretends not to believe her. This failure of "l'homme de science dans l'exercice de son sacerdoce"[22] to provide "l'oracle infaillible,"[23] even though he expressly refers to himself as "un confesseur,"[24] is in fact the lie deep inside him, here accompanied by cowardice, which forces him to pretend that her truth is "un villain rêve."[25]

(3) Mouchette despairs, not having been able to share even the secret of murder with Gallet. The dialogue continues in terms of Gallet's pseudo-priesthood. Stupefied by his refusal to share her truth, Mouchette warns him that his voluntary blindness will drive her insane. "Car je me repens!"[26] she shouts, as she sees in a flash the reminder of her repentance in its deepest reality, which transforms her saving confession to fantasy: "Ton rêve!"[27] She utters this devastating truth just before her final burst of laughter, which drains the blood from Gallet's face.

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[22] Ibid., p. 69.

[23] Ibid., p. 70.

[24] Ibid., p. 71.

[25] Ibid., p. 72.

[26] Ibid., p. 74.

[27] Ibid., p. 75.

Gallet is the last man to whom she can speak truthfully, and he cannot receive her truth, which is the last link with love for Mouchette. As his refusal becomes real to Mouchette, Bernanos repeats for the third time the image of abandonment of existence, childhood existence, but this time someone replaces the existing child: " ... elle se sentit tout à coup, l'intelligence froide et positive d'une femme, soeur tragique de son existence."[28] It is significant that this transformation is described in terms of greater intelligence, at the expense of identity.

In her final minutes of the third confrontation, "le regard de la misérable enfant n'exprimait déjà plus qu'un affreux désespoir, comme un suprême appel à la pitié."[29] But despair is not quite finalized. The despair in her eyes is at last likened to a plea for pity. As Mouchette begins to cry out, Gallet stifles her, in a gesture symbolically parallel to his stifling of her confession. Arms and legs pinned, face covered with an ether-soaked handkerchief, "Mouchette, vaincue, s'abandonna."[30]

Shortly after this sterile confrontation, Mouchette bears a child. Thus Bernanos relates in terms of physical actions what has taken place spiritually: Mouchette conceiving the word libre, then bearing a nothing in the forms of murder and a dead fetus; describing her spiritual letting-go, and repeating the action physically under ether; reaching out desperately and finally with love, truth, and repentance, only to be pushed back into utter isolation, then physically stifled.

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[28] Ibid., p. 78.

[29] Ibid., p. 82.

[30] Ibid., p. 84.

In the first three confrontations Mouchette is decisively affected by each man, but has little effect on any of them, other than to ruffle the surface of self-deception. Even her murder of Cadignan is referred to slightingly by l'abbe Donissan: "Tu l'as délivré de toi."[31] Bernanos is not concerned with the destiny of these mediocrities who inspire his bitter caricatures. He refers to them in terms of nothingness, meaning simply their insignificance. This nothingness is radically different from the Nothingness which obsesses Bernanos when he is dealing with those whose Nothingness or near-Nothingness is tragically close to ultimate Being. The major characters throw themselves with such force away from mediocrity, that their Nothingness or Being must be total, without compromise, Luciferian or God-like.

Death for the major character is associated with Nothingness, as a time of the rapprochement of the physical and metaphysical processes at work in the personality, as a transitional point for the spirit, but described physically with such images as that existence faces death.

The major characters in their extreme commitment in the direction of Nothingness or Being, exist physically, psychologically and metaphysically; and on these three levels of reality what is of import happens with the suddenness of a flash of lightning. They die suddenly, with notable exceptions such as the curé d'Ambicourt and M. Ouine. They see at a stroke the disintegration of their psyches, and they fly swiftly to evil for evil's sake (the lie is evil's heart), or to good for good's sake (anguished tenacity is truth).

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[31] Ibid., p. 86.

This triple-layered suddenness, however, is laced through with the complementary element of organic development in time. The sudden lust, lie, murder, suicide, are referred to in musing asides as being rooted in the past: " ... le vice pousse au coeur une racine lente et profonde, mais la belle fleur pleine de venin n'a son grand éclat qu'un seul jour."[32] The flowering poison of Mouchette's vice is prepared in the first three encounters, which all take place on the human level.

In the face of her father, she resorts to defiance, is described as an animal, and conceives an absolute liberty which carries her to Cadignan's side. Here she lies, is likened to an existing little girl, and murders. The father and the lover are bound in their non-comprehension and its negative effects on Mouchette. In the face of Gallet she resorts to the darkest truth, is described as a laugher and as demented, and gives birth to a dead child.

The dual parallelism is adhered to faithfully when she confronts Donissan. Defiance, the lie, the evil truth, give way to dark angoisse and hatred. The animal, the hardened petite fille, the demented laugher, become as a toy "entre les mains de Satan."[33] The progression from liberty to murder, to insanity, and to stillbirth reaches its culmination in a totally unpremeditated suicide.

The doctor and the priest are bound in their comprehension and its effects on Mouchette. The first three confrontations take place in the dead of night, but the fourth and last comes to a close as dawn breaks.

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[32] Ibid., p. 86.

[33] Ibid., p. 87.

It is at this time symbolic of hope, return and resurrection that Mouchette's final despairing act takes place. What has proceeded as a solidly human anguish and development now becomes dramatically operative on both the human and the supernatural levels. It is the supernatural reality that attaches to, or incarnates, the human appearances, and in Mouchette's case, transcends and gives the lie to the human reality.

In appearance Mouchette is an adolescent tramp whose lover is thought to have committed suicide, and who, while hospitalized for "troubles mentaux" bears a child. Mouchette's suicide is an insane act, as is her deathbed request to be carried to the Church. As her father and Doctor Gallet would attest, " ... l'approche de la mort bouleversait sa faible raison."[34] The supernatural interactions between Donissan and Mouchette being central to the novel, it should be mentioned here that in appearance Donissan will be the heroic priest who dies in the confessional, revealing the hardness of Christ's peace to the cynical, sentimental St. Marin, but who has very probably despaired.

Up to the time of her meeting with Donissan, Mouchette's story has been relatively simple and one-dimensional, a downward spiral: (1) down to private desires, (2) down to Cadignan, (3) farther down to Gallet, her existence as a being left farther and farther behind.

With Donissan, however, simplicity flees, and we are allowed to witness the battle between God and Satan that rages behind appearance. Mouchette's motion continues in the following intricate sequence: (4) all the way down to where the priest, in a ferocious rapture, addresses

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[34] Ibid., p. 101.

her as Satan, (5) up again to a summit of vision, where she sees herself as God sees her, by the instrumentality of Donissan's words, (6) plunged downward again to despair in solitude, a more painful plunge since her self-vision has stirred a hope of regaining existence, (7) down totally, transcendentally, to consumption in Satan, who thrusts her toward suicide, and finally, (8) up to absorption in victory, ultimate reconciliation, union with the God whose graces overwhelm even this "Ste. Brigitte du néant."[35]

The confrontation with Donissan determines the final outcome of Mouchette's battle, but at the same time it is humanly the least convincing. Its grotesqueness is Bernanos' method of forcing the reader to another dimension of reality without abandoning the flesh and blood figures with whom he has begun to identify. The appearance is insanity, the reality is possession. Mouchette knows she is not insane, but she does not know that Satan is in her. After her self-knowledge she knows that she will kill herself.

An examination in some detail of the conversation from the moment when Mouchette encounters Donissan to the moment when he addresses her as Satan, will enable us to see how intricately Bernanos has woven together the universe of the flesh and that of the spirit. When first Mouchette views the priest her downward motion is intensified shockingly. "En un éclair, la colère, le défi, un désespoir unique ..."[36] is so clearly visible on her face that " ... cette figure d'enfant qui exister

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[35] Ibid., p. 102.

[36] Ibid., p. 106.

n'avait plus d'âge."[37] There in the formless darkness just before dawn, the face of an existing woman without existence.

As Donissan invites Mouchette to walk along with him the final dramatic battle begins in her heart, in the form of "une inquiétude dont elle ne savait pas encore qu'elle était une espérance secrète."[38]

With the stirring of hope in Mouchette, Bernanos moves to the supernatural level in Donissan, and the first quasi-magical actions take place as the young priest reveals his clairvoyance, " ... j'ai vu le nom de Dieu écrit dans votre coeur."[39] And again the physical act confirms the spiritual, " ... il traça du pouce, sur la poitrine de Mouchette, une double croix."[40]

Donissan sees into a heart which is "pour tout autre scellé,"[41] with a vision "si paternel"[42] that is divine. He later explains this vision, this gift of reading souls, in terms of simple pity, "une violente pitié."[43]

The drama is now operating humanly in terms of inquietude in Mouchette and fatherly kindness in Donissan, with the supernatural entering in as clairvoyance. The effect on Mouchette is only briefly hopeful. For a moment she feels herself, under the gaze of the man

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[37] Ibid., p. 110.

[38] Ibid., p. 111.

[39] Ibid., p. 124.

[40] Ibid., p. 126.

[41] Ibid., p. 127.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid., p. 129.

of God, "hésitante et comme attendrie."[44] For the first time since the mention of her love for Gallet, Mouchette softens, but after the brief confusion she continues the downward plunge. This time, however, the entry of another person into her spirit is made horribly explicit:

> alors un secours lui vint ... voix entre mille autre voix; ... compagnon et bourreau, tour a tour plaintif, languissant, source des larmes, puis pressant, brutal, avide de contraindre, puis encore, à la minute décisive, cruel, féroce, tout entier présent dans un rire douloureux, amer, jadis gémiteur, maintenant maître.[45]

Bernanos doubts that there are words to express Mouchette's "transport sauvage" after the priest's symbolic touch, but words come, all but unintelligible with rage, "Je vous hais!"[46] Satan enters in, and comes out as hatred, which the man of God swiftly names for its deeper reality, "N'ayez pas honte."[47] He then proceeds from the deeper reality, first by assuring her that her childhood has not been irretrievable up to this moment of Satanic hatred: "Jusqu'à ce jour vous avez vécu comme une enfant."[48]

Taking her back to her childhood step by step, he begins where Gallet failed, and absolves her from guilt for Cadignan's murder, " ... votre volonté n'était libre."[49]

As he continues to speak, his vision of the spiritual level of

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[44] Ibid., p. 130.

[45] Ibid., p. 136.

[46] Ibid., p. 140.

[47] Ibid., p. 141.

[48] Ibid., p. 144.

[49] Ibid., p. 146.

reality overwhelms, but does not supplant, the physical, and the imagery tends toward excess: " ... les paroles qu'il prononça clouèrent Mouchette sur place, et retentirent dans son coeur."[50] The sublime force of Donissan's words is set in relief against the germinal significance of Mouchette in his priesthood, "Il parlait comme il ... ne parlerait plus jamais, ... même dans la plénitude de ses dons, car elle était sa première proie."[51]

What Donissan gives to Mouchette, by means of words, with a terrible gentleness, is "sa propre histoire, ... non point dramatisée, ... enrichie de détails ... mais résumée ... réduite à rien, vue de dedans."[52]

Spellbound by Donissan's voice, which has entered into her guts, Mouchette feels every rotten thing within her named and set to flame. What is central here is that her story is vue de dedans, so that as Donissan continues, her own vision becomes indistinguishable from his; her own witness of her disintegration is born. Bernanos uses the violent image of the two voices becoming as "un seul jet de sang vermeil."[53]

Hence we have a supernatural union between the man of God and the girl who has become as "la petite balle d'un enfant, entre les mains de Satan."[54] But it is a union expressed in words spoken and heard in rapture, at the supernatural level, so that when they cease, and their flame scorches nor longer, Mouchette feels herself come back

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[50] Ibid., p. 148.

[51] Ibid., p. 160.

[52] Ibid., p. 162.

[53] Ibid., p. 163.

[54] Ibid., p. 166.

to life, and immediately avows, "Je n'ai rien dit." The duration of their conversation seems immeasurable, but the night is finished, and Mouchette's face is again that of an "enfant vieillie."[55]

The priest addressing her contemptuously, likens the fruits of Mouchette's liberty to her stillborn child, "Tu n'as porté que de faux crimes, comme tu n'as porté qu'un foetus."[56] Swiftly he describes the phases of Mouchette's descent since Cadignan's death. As Donissan speaks, his breathing becomes difficult, and the glow of "lucidité surhumaine"[57] rises again in his eyes, but this time his voice and eyes are without pity. He speaks of Mouchette as "slime" and brutally names the spirit within her: "La boue dont tu es faite, Satan!"[58]

The battle now rages fully, and the God of Donissan would avenge the ravaged child. Mouchette steels herself for another vision, from which escape will perhaps be impossible: "Mouchette sentit son coeur se serrer, comme à une brusque descente."[59] Then continuously, the physical sensation of falling and being caught up again, as the priest names generations of sinners in Mouchette's family, describes the cancerous spread of their sins out into the world. His story, as before, is "saisie du dedans."[60] Repeating the image of la brèche Donissan shows

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[55] Ibid., p. 168.

[56] Ibid., p. 169.

[57] Ibid., p. 172.

[58] Ibid., p. 175.

[59] Ibid., p. 176.

[60] Ibid., p. 178.

sin, foul, hot, bursting its bounds, spilling out and reproducing itself in time and space.

What is of greatest significance here is that Mouchette, being given this second vision, is forced consciously back to her own "faute initiale, ignorée de tous dans son coeur d'enfant ... "[61] Filled with Satan, hanging on pitiless words of the man of God, "Mouchette se vit comme elle ne s'était jamais vue ... "[62] Bernanos turns again to the near-grotesque to emphasize the effect of the supernatural on his character:

> Alors elle se dressa, battant l'air de ses mains, la tête jetée en arrière, puis d'une épaule à l'autre, absolument comme un noyé qui s'enfonce. La sueur ruisselait sur son visage ... la bouche contractée ... les reins creusés ... [63]

At the end of her confrontation with Gallet, Mouchette's cry of despair is stifled by the pseudo-priest. This time the cry forms again on her distorted lips, and the real priest does nothing to stifle it, but nothing comes from Mouchette's vibrating throat--exactly nothing. Their confrontation is consummated. She flees to the solitude of the same room where her liberté was born in defiance.

The end is near, and it parallels perfectly the beginning, first by taking form in two hours of "solitude d'angoisse"[64] after the crucial meeting with Donissan. But the end is rich with conflict, with the final fruits of the long descent.

First there is a vague desire to achieve again "la hauteur" to

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[61] Ibid., p. 179.

[62] Ibid., p. 185.

[63] Ibid., p. 191.

[64] Ibid., p. 193.

which the man of God had transported her as he gave her the two deep visions of herself. It is paradoxical for Bernanos to speak of heights when the visions were specifically intended to allow Mouchette to see how far she had descended. At any rate, all that remains of that vision, of those heights, of "la lumière qui l'a percée de part en part ... "[65] is a vague sorrow, the source of which is incomprehensible to Mouchette.

Secondly, she entertains the final possibility that she is insane, that she has begun to descend "une à une les marches noirs."[66] But she masters this possibility by restraint, especially by refusing to cry out, so that little by little she is able to become "la spectatrice de sa propre folie."[67] Once this is achieved she is rewarded with "un calm affreux ... Comme la chute brusque du vent ... "[68] This calm is shortlived, however, and as she gazes distractedly at the light of dawn, "même la folie lui refusait son asile ténébreux."[69] After the pretense of insanity and its brief calm, Mouchette is driven by her nature to search deeper for her "mal réel, inguérissable, inconnue."[70] Thus does Bernanos prepare to move finally, irrevocably from the universe of the natural, surface reality of insanity, to the universe of the supernatural, profound reality of Satan within Mouchette. However, the author's compassion for his creature remains constant, even at this moment of naming her deepest evil.

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[65] Ibid., p. 201.

[66] Ibid., p. 204.

[67] Ibid., p. 206.

[68] Ibid., p. 210.

[69] Ibid., p. 211.

[70] Ibid., p. 214.

Though he designates her as "cette mystique ingénue, petite servante de Satan, Sainte Brigitte du néant,"[71] her gift of self to Satan rises "moins de son esprit de sa pauvre chair souillée."[72]

As her final act of despair assumes the quality of a consent, coordination with the preceding confrontations is achieved with marvelous clarity and simplicity. In terms of time, just before Satan heeds her call, "la minute présente était toute angoisse. Le passé un trou noir. L'avenir un autre trou noir."[73] After the first confrontation the past was a very real existence of childhood which was being deliberately abandoned. The present was the moment when her defiance had made her libre, and the future was the open road into the night, which led her lover.

In terms of levels of reality, or universes, her false perception of her own insanity brought her brief calm, but now, as her "cruel Seigneur"[74] arrives with deeper succour, she receives "une paix muette, solitaire, glacée, comparable à la délectation du néant."[75]

Once this final succour comes, even Mouchette's body responds with warmth and certainty, and, as before, "son esprit fuyait déjà sur la route de la délivrance."[76] But this time the road which provides for no return, the dawn which Mouchette cannot regard as a symbol of

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[71] Ibid., p. 215.

[72] Ibid., p. 216.

[73] Ibid., p. 217.

[74] Ibid., p. 220.

[75] Ibid., p. 224.

[76] Ibid., p. 226.

victory, lead to her father's razor, which she grinds surely and ferociously into her throat.

Mouchette's story would seem to end with this final and total destruction by Satan, but for a brief mention in a letter far into the next section of the novel, concerning "Le désir de cette jeune personne, manifesté publiquement, d'être conduite au pied de l'église pour y expirer."[77] Donissan forcibly carries out the wish of the blood drenched girl, and thus acts as the grotesque vehicle of the unlikely, but central, spiritual triumph of a Christian Existentialist.

For Mouchette tragedy becomes victory, because the man with God in his words restored childhood to her. Bernanos went to great pains to all but sever the girl from the integrity of childhood, carefully leaving a strand by which she could partake of final grace.

It is true that the priest is everything that father, lover, and pseudo-priest were not, but he is more--he is the victim of his love as was Christ. Donissan, however, reveals some unhealthy, even unChristian tendencies which seem to tarnish God's victory over Satan in Mouchette. In his determination to win souls, he is willing to sacrifice all: "Mon repos, mon honneur sacerdotal, et mon salut même."[78] Theologically, this is a sick posture, and exceeds the legitimate sadness of the man of great vision. Bernanos attributes this sadness to Donissan, and through the wise Mernon-Segrais foretells the ultimate negative potential.

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[77] Ibid., p. 240.

[78] Ibid., p. 242.

> Vous avez entretenu le désespoir en vous. --Non pas le désespoir, s'écria-t-il, mais la crainte. --Le désespoir, répéta l'abbé Mernon-Segrais sur le même ton, et qui vous eut conduit de la haine aveugle du péché au mépris et à la haine du pécheur.[79]

The possibility is that Donissan pays for Mouchette with his own eternal defeat, apparently growing in sanctity as the cure of an obscure village. Subtly, imperceptibly, the process that began with a sad obsession for souls leads over the threshold of the knowledge of Good and Evil, to the "désir du néant recherché pour lui-même."[80] The anguish that the holy man carries within himself, "si large et pesante,"[81] is "Satan." As Louis Chaigne puts it, "Homme de Dieu héroique et triste, privé de la joie des enfants de Dieu, il meurt dans son confessional, de plus en plus assiegé, sans les visibles consolations de l'Espérance."[82]

In death Donissan asks of Satan, "Depuis quand as-tu pris le visage et la voix de mon Maître? ... Quel jour ai-je reçu ... ton désespoir?"[83]

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[79] Ibid., p. 254.

[80] Ibid., p. 272.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Louis Chaigne, Bernanos, p. 67.

[83] Bernanos, Sous le Soleil de Satan, p. 292.

CHAPTER II

NOTHINGNESS: STEENY AND MONSIEUR OUINE

Steeny is another Mouchette, a solitary, feline, adventurous adolescent who descends swiftly toward Nothingness, discarding existence. He, too, sets out from an unhappy, meaningless home, and is crucially affected by a relationship with a totally negative character, Monsieur Ouine. There is again a final, otherworldly conversation which seems, step by step, to indicate ultimate loss of identity and hope, but which ends on a swift, astonishing note of defeat for the Satan who has stalked the existence of a child.

Although it was begun in 1931, Monsieur Ouine is Bernanos' last published novel, and elucidates invaluably the later evolution of the Mouchette-figure and Bernanos' thinking concerning the ultimate consequences of absolute loss of childhood.

The supernatural interaction so important between Mouchette and Donissan is crucial between Steeny and M. Ouine, and likewise penetrates beyond superficial realities.

There is no succession of encounters in Steeny's drama as there was in Mouchette's, but there are important parallels in Steeny's relationship with the dying former professor. Mouchette flees from a father caricatured as one of Bernanos' non-entities; Steeny's father has disappeared during a battle in World War I. Mouchette's romantic curiosity leads to a lover; Steeny's curiosity leads to a companionship latent

with unsavory eroticism. Mouchette comes to rely on a sterile savant as oracle; Steeny comes to the same degree of confidence in M. Ouine. The parallels are somewhat disrupted after this, however. Mouchette finally confronts the saintly victim of love, who reads the souls and offers himself on her behalf. Steeny's master simply draws Steeny toward deeper union in Nothingness, and fails, leaving Steeny free on the threshold of life.

It is interesting to remark, on the one hand, that of all Bernanos' negative characters, only M. Ouine is totally lost, and on the other hand, that of Bernanos' parade of adolescent absolutists, only Steeny is left with frighteningly equivocal freedom, on the threshold of life. In the case of Mouchette, a dramatic, overpowering love-sacrifice places her among the elect. In the case of Steeny, an overpowering Satan-figure all but consumes him, and leaves him with that most tenuous and fateful existentialist possession: human liberty. Is his the same "liberty" that ensnared Mouchette step by step? Or is his the existential liberty with which he will be able to carve meaning out of what lies ahead? Bernanos does not say. From what is known from his paradoxes, though, it can safely be stated, first, that Bernanos is despairing for society in Monsieur Ouine. Civilization (the village) is portrayed as something which Satan has successfully brought under his chaotic domination. But secondly, personal freedom, especially as informed by grace, is the remaining and enduring hope for men--not mankind, but men, one by one.

In a single stroke Bernanos reveals a deeper despair for organized societies than he has heretofore expressed, and a deeper hope for men, to the extent that he allows Steeny to undergo the ultimately corrupting

influence of the destroyer of existence and emerge free, without the slightest indication that grace will intervene to weaken the novel's authenticity.

Bernanos' tendency to identify organized society with the world whose master is the Prince of Darkness approaches a Manicheism in which the principle of light can exist only in the individual person, in spite of the evil forces of society.

The fact that Bernanos developed the main lines of his thought during a generation in which science and totalitarian politics were threatening to destroy humanistic values as he understands them, makes it easier to understand the urgent, sometimes, strident, tone he adopted in both his polemics and novels.

The spirit of technology, of the cyclops, whether in science as knowledge for knowledge's sake, or in politics as order for order's sake, was for Bernanos the spirit of the knowledge of Good and Evil that destroyed existentialist freedom and integrity in the Garden of Eden. Bernanos referred fleetingly to Mouchette's loss of identity in terms of gaining intelligence appropriately during her confrontation with Gallet. Then, in the implied despair of Donissan, endemic knowledge of Good and Evil is made explicitly culpable. But in the case of M. Ouine, intelligence is portrayed in detail as the initial fault, la brèche through which has flowed the corrupting stream. Thus is the spiritual disease of M. Ouine described as "Le plus puissant des moyens de désagrégation, la curiosité portée jusqu'à la haine ... "[1] For Bernanos this excessive curiosity is the destroyer of the person

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[1]Georges Bernanos, Monsieur Ouine, p. 153.

integrated with his existence, and by extension, of the fidelity of a civilization to its roots.

In M. Ouine, it is not merely curiosity, but curiosity carried to extremes in which cruelty becomes inextricable from the initial desire to know, to solve, to order. Since childhood, M. Ouine's intellectual life has included this cruelty, which forced him to study "avec une patience sauvage."[2]

This is the spirit that brings forth chaos in the village in which M. Ouine is passing his dying days. M. Ouine's effects on the village are vague, evil, reciprocal, occurring in the half-darkness which is the atmosphere of the novel. But his effects on Steeny are very clear, or at least are made as explicit as Bernanos can make them, up to the indecipherable conversation after M. Ouine's death.

In the relationship between M. Ouine and Steeny there is again the warfare between God and Satan for the soul of the child, except that God is absent. For the reader who remembers the epic simplicity of the supernatural combat for Mouchette, this is an arresting change of tactic. It is my belief that in Monsieur Ouine there are sure signs in Bernanos of a completely new involvement with the realities of human freedom, and that it is radically more relevant as literature of twentieth-century man than all his other novels.

M. Ouine is allegorically all manner of evil power, concentrated in one old man, and Steeny is all youth of his generation, surrounded by social forces impregnated with evil, followed by Satanic human beings and containing the seeds, in the form of freedom, of Nothingness or Being.

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[2] Ibid., p. 154.

Steeny's descent or flight from existence might be viewed in three stages: early relationship with M. Ouine, conversation with M. Ouine as he dies, and conversation with M. Ouine after he dies. In analyzing these stages briefly we see that Bernanos begins by implying defects in Steeny's character as a result of too exclusively feminine surroundings in childhood. As he approaches young manhood, he resents his mother's close friendship with another woman, "qui a creusé tout à coup entre lui et son monde familier un tel abîme de solitude."[3] In the depth of his solitude he ponders the essential mystery of disintegration, and we see the Mouchette-process in its initial stage: "Est-il sorti de l'enfance, presque à son insu?"[4] The answer is yes, and as he searches for a road, prepares to leap into the future, the child, for whom "le demain attendu, d'un coeur tranquille, retrouvé chaque matin surprise, n'est plus."[5] The key to the process is the move away from the Being.

Mouchette moved from a negative relationship with her father to solitude, to the leap into the night, and to a series of annihilating relationships. So does Steeny move from mother to solitude, to M. Ouine, "le compagnon prédestiné de sa vie ... "

In one of their early conversations, Steeny reveals a Mouchette-like wish for the death of the past in favor of a magical future. M. Ouine's reminiscence of the old house of Mme Nerecis elicits an ominous retort

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[3] Ibid., p. 18.

[4] Ibid., p. 19.

[5] Ibid.

from Steeny: "Bah! ... le passé ne compte rien. Le présent non plus d'ailleurs, ou comme une petite frange d'ombre, à la lisière de l'avenir. L'avenir."[6]

Steeny moves, like Mouchette, from his pronouncement of "liberation," to successive stages of ensnarement by his fascination for M. Ouine. What Steeny experiences as readiness to leap into adventure is in reality the birth in him of the same curiosity that has consumed his master. In a flash of prophecy, Miss, his mother's companion, warns Steeny:

> Je connais votre race damnée ... , d'hommes plus durs que l'enfer. Regardez-vous dans la glace: Dieu! Je crains que rien ne vous rassasie jamais, ni le lait ni le sang ... vous resterez sur votre soif ...[7]

This prediction reveals the extent to which Steeny has begun to resemble his hero.

M. Ouine is dying of tuberculosis, in a constant index to the decomposition of his spirit. Early in the novel, Bernanos suggests by means of M. Ouine's physical condition the union that is to develop between Steeny and his hero. As they talk at night Steeny feels so strongly attached to M. Ouine that his very lungs seem "se creuser de même feu sournois qui l'a dévoré."[8] Of course, the sense of sharing physical disease prefigures the sharing of the more profound spiritual consumption, in a striking variation of Bernanos' use of physical/spiritual corollaries.

In the same early conversation M. Ouine suggests that the truth

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[6]Ibid., p. 22.

[7]Ibid., p. 130.

[8]Ibid., p. 23.

behind Steeny's sense of well-being in his host's room is an unconscious love of death. M. Ouine is speaking of physical death, specifically his own, and promises to teach Steeny to share his fond anticipation of death. The suave, professorial contemplation of death as simple biological fact will be transformed in the brutally climactic conversation at the hour of M. Ouine's actual death.

Bernanos leaves the matter of M. Ouine's utterances after death ambiguous. Did Steeny imagine the conversation? The answer is not relevant, except that it is in keeping with M. Ouine's character that in his final state he should remain vague and fluctuating. What is very relevant to Steeny's childhood is the breathtaking speed with which he becomes as one with his hero at the hour of death:

> La respiration de M. Ouine ne trouble pas le silence de la petite chambre, elle lui donne seulement une espèce de gravité funèbre ... Il semble à Philippe que son propre souffle se règle docilement sur ce râle si convenable, si discret. Leurs deux coeurs aussi, peut-être?[9]

As Mouchette felt the voice of the priest become one with her inner voice, Steeny feels his breathing become indistinguishable from the death battle of his hero. When the death-bed conversation is drawing to a close, the Mouchette-Donissan unison recurs almost word for word as Steeny "sentait sa propre voix s'accorder à celle de son maitre, si étroitement que l'une et l'autre ne semblaient plus en faire qu'une. Ils parlaient ainsi, dans l'ombre, d'égal à égal ... dans une solitude parfaite."[10]

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[9] Ibid., pp. 239-240.

[10] Ibid., p. 248.

Mouchette finds herself with an agonizing rebirth of hope. Steeny seems to be on another path. Donissan is revealing Mouchette's disintegrative process from within herself. M. Ouine, though, is revealing only his own nothingness. Let us examine the key points of the death-bed conversation now, in order to trace Steeny's process without being concerned with whether the dramatic revelations take place before or after M. Ouine's death. It is sufficient to know that Steeny has entered into a frightful union with M. Ouine at the time of death. It may be of human interest to note also that Steeny consumes a bottle of bad port during the two or three crucial hours.

M. Ouine speaks:

> La vie a passé comme un crible. Vainement me suis-je ouvert, dilaté, je n'étais qu'orifice, aspiration, engloutissement, corps et âme, néant de toutes parts ... Je désirais, je m'enfliais de désir au lieu de rassasier ma faim, je ne m'incorporais nulle substance, ni bien, ni mal ... et maintenant ... je me sens fondre et disparaître dans cette gueule vorace.[11]

Horrible contrast to the notion of <u>la brèche</u> as threshold of adventure!

From the candid admission he becomes nothing. M. Ouine goes on to tell Steeny what would be necessary for him to have a grasp on Being. "J'ai besoin d'un secret ... ; n'eut-il que le volume d'un petit grain de plomb, ... je me referais autour, je reprendrais poids et consistance."[12] But for M. Ouine, to have a secret would mean to have "une existence entière"[13] and simultaneously, liaison with hope, rather than full

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[11] <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 242.

[12] <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 246.

[13] <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 244.

unequivocal recognition of "cette décomposition bizarre"[14] which has been his life and which is now ready to bear sudden fruit of death without hope.

As Mouchette isolated herself, moved away from her history, lost touch even with remorse, became glacée in despair, so does M. Ouine: "Je n'ai même pas un remords ... "[15] Any access to Being, whether it be one secret, one pang of remorse, would mean for M. Ouine " ... toute une vie, une longue vie, toute une enfance, une nouvelle enfance."[16] His final vision of his own state is devoid of any such means and he judges himself as "hors de toute vue, hors de cause ... non pas absous ni condamné ... perdu, égaré."[17]

The drunken boy sits listening to his companion's "voix de stentor"[18] and as night proceeds, M. Ouine draws Steeny farther into his non-secret:

> Les fortes épaules couvraient Steeny de leur ombre, elles avaient la forme d'un arc surbaissé, d'une voute puissante, exactement calculée, inébranlable. Elles donnaient à l'enfant une impression presque écrasante de durée sans changement ni fin, d'éternité, d'équilibre éternel.[19]

Steeny, over whom the shadow of the shoulders "dessinait toujours sa courbe trapue,"[20] cannot absorb the truth of his vast Nothingness,

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., p. 248.

[18] Ibid., p. 243.

[19] Ibid., p. 245.

[20] Ibid., p. 246.

that there is no secret left, that his hero can " ... rien donner à personne ... ni rien recevoir non plus,"[21] because as M. Ouine assures him with " ... une conviction glacée, ... cela romprait l'équilibre ... "[22]

M. Ouine wonders, with some semblance of fear, what he has wrought in Steeny's young life. "Il suffirait que j'eusse effacé un mot de ce qui s'y trouve écrit, ... une seule syllable, de cette langue inconnue."[23] Steeny, curious, and still not fully aware of what is being revealed to him, asks, "Mais que craignez-vous tant, M. Ouine? Est-ce la mort?"[24] M. Ouine, desperately aware of what death is and that he is "perdu, égaré"[25] replies, " ... la mort a toujours été pour moi le dénouement d'un drame moral; je crains d'avoir manqué ce drame."[26] Steeny naively suggests encouragement, "Et puis, rien peut-être? Pourquoi pas?"[27]

"Imbécile! ... s'il n'y avait rien, je serais quelque chose, bonne ou mauvaise. C'est moi qui ne suis rien."[28] The perfect balance, the ice-cold peace which is his final state, is his ultimate reduction to Nothingness.

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., p. 248.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

The process of imparting this final Nothingness to Steeny begins suddenly to operate, and "Steeny le reçut avec son visage, son front, ses yeux, il baigna ses tempes et brusquement remplit sa poitrine ainsi qu'un bloc de glace."[29]

Stupefied, silent, frozen, Steeny heard the last words from M. Ouine's voice, with its "timbre de basson nasillard, fait pour rassurer les marmots."[30]

Would Steeny like to know what death is for M. Ouine? It is to be devoured forever by his own desire, "de la manière dont les élus tombent en Dieu ... Je rentre en moi-même pour toujours, mon enfant."[31]

The boy, now having heard the final truth, his bottle empty, hears M. Ouine finish, "dans un rire d'abord étouffé, puis franc et limpide ..."[32] which continues grotesquely, until "il n'avait aucun sens humain ... il coulait de l'ombre ainsi qu'un mince filet limonieux, insaisissable, intarissable ... , sans commencement ni fin."[33]

Steeny's existence? As the strange, soft laughter begins, "l'ombre des larges épaules cessa de peser au dessus de lui et il se retrouva debout, libre."[34]

The perfect balance which Bernanos equates with a final and

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[29] Ibid., pp. 248-249.

[30] Ibid., p. 249.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

irrevocable despair is effective as a means of lending a sense of symmetry to the totality of M. Ouine's loss. However, it is somewhat unsatisfying to attempt to reconcile balance with Nothingness, especially the Nothingness of Bernanos which implies all the most horrible conditions of eternal damnation. Moreover it is jarring to attempt to reconcile this balance with the brief but explicit anguish of M. Ouine concerning his effects on Steeny. If M. Ouine really would like to erase his evil influence, can he be totally beyond cause?

In spite of unsolved problems in his portrayals, and somewhat dated preoccupations with the evils inherent in very young technological societies, Bernanos achieves a radical innovation in his creation of Steeny. Heretofore he has continually dwelt on existence as a child, as threshold of the future, but has unreasonably refused to his children and adolescents the liberté to work out this future. He has intervened time and again with a near-pathological violence, removing them from existing freedom, and often from life itself.

With the creation of Steeny, however, there appears an unprecedented laisser vivre which, though certainly not brimming with hope, is not suicide, murder, total swift loss of self. The irresistible hypothesis presents itself: what dynamic evolution might have come to light in Bernanos' treatment of human freedom if he had written for another twenty years? Might he have come to accept the notion of the Spirit breathing in massive social upheavals? Might he have been charmed by some moderate forms of socialism and by the current, relatively bold exchanges between orthodox Christian leaders and orthodox Marxists? Or would such departures have opened la brèche in his spirit by means of which he might have become what he feared most: M. Ouine himself?

CHAPTER III

THE SECOND MOUCHETTE AND FATALITY

In terms of the last strands of existence, the second Mouchette must emerge as a sharp contrast to the Mouchette of Sous le Soleil de Satan. The first Mouchette maintained a dramatically delicate hold on hope, which was blown into an astonishing and perhaps deceiving victory in the supernatural order. Bernanos certainly tampered with Mouchette's human prerogatives, though the grace of her dying wish escapes the category of the deus ex machina--grotesque perhaps, but a deeply engaging climax in an adventure of the invisible universe meshing with the carnal.

The second Mouchette does not achieve wisdom by grasping a last strand, with or without supernatural assistance. There is no clairvoyant scapegoat. In fact, La Nouvelle Histoire de Mouchette is the only Bernanos novel in which there is no priest. This omission is intended, we can suppose, as a castigation of a corrupt and ineffectual clergy. Without a Christ-like priest, Mouchette is left, literally, to fate. The first Mouchette's freedom is tampered with; the second Mouchette has love.

However, the second Mouchette is a Mouchette figure, proceeding with a terribly certain motion toward Nothingness. Risk, rude opening into the night, and la brèche, again are key elements in the process, and again the image of physical falling dramatizes the spiritual descent.

But what concerns us in the second Mouchette is whether she is ultimately swallowed up in the Nothingness which seems to be her destiny. If she is not, what can save her, or give life to the appearance? If she has no freedom, by what can Bernanos enable her to be numbered among the children of Being, without stripping her of literary value? The answer is the compassion of her creator, which goes far toward removing freedom of choice and replacing it with fate. Insofar as determinism prevails in the second Mouchette's story, it loses tension as human drama, become sub-tragedy. But insofar as Bernanos indicts a world which has forced Mouchette into the stream of black fate, he creates tension in which Mouchette's suicide can be seen as tragedy, to which loss of existence is the key.

In La Nouvelle Histoire de Mouchette, complex interplay is put aside and one adolescent peasant girl is followed from her initial solitude, which she relished with "une délicieuse angoisse,"[1] to her suicide, which she approached suddenly, at the right time, as "une sorte de jeu sinistre."[2]

The story is extremely simple. Mouchette wants to escape the squalor of her surroundings, is disappointed in lust, but feels that she will not be disappointed in death. Within this simple framework, La Nouvelle Histoire de Mouchette expresses beautifully one of Bernanos' paradoxes: death of the child who has lost childhood.

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[1]Georges Bernanos, La Nouvelle Histoire de Mouchette, p. 8.

[2]Ibid., p. 223.

Albert Béguin's interpretation of the face of death resembling the face of childhood in Bernanos' novels is valuable here, preliminary to accompanying the second Mouchette in her motion toward death:

> Le climat de la mort est ... singulièrement apparenté au climat de l'enfance. C'est que l'enfance, l'âge des départs, est aussi l'âge du risque assuré. Le sourire enfantin reparait sur le visage des morts, parce qu'il a été d'abord le sourire de l'audace et du risque accepté; l'enfance, préservée dans la profondeur de l'être après les ruptures de l'adolescence et à travers le divertissement pascalien de l'âge mur, attend l'heure où c'est d'elle qu'on aura besoin pour faire face au seul risque véritable.[3]

Youth and death are one and the same, éternel matin aube pure, toward which Bernanos directs all his nights even the most morbid, in his personal anguish and in that of his major characters.

The child Mouchette, in her solitude, loses her childhood and is drawn to death, but not as "le bout de la nuit."[4] For her, death is black fate, spontaneous, inevitable zero, center of nothing at the end of a solid spiral. Her solitude is the key to the initiation of the motion, as it might well be, coming from the soul of the novelist who wrote of himself the year before: "Je me sens seul, aussi seul que j'avais rêvé de l'être à quinze ans."[5] Bernanos makes his own solitude synonymous with his dark childhood, and that solitude was frequently considered by Bernanos as a cruel avenue of despair:

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[3]Albert Béguin, Bernanos par lui-même, p. 52.

[4]Bernanos, La Nouvelle Histoire de Mouchette, p. 79.

[5]Beguin, Bernanos par lui-même, p. 122.

> Je connais de la pauvreté l'aspect le plus affreux qui, entre tous les autres, la rend si pénible. Je veux dire la tragique solitude dans laquelle elle force souvent les êtres à vivre et à mourir ... J'en ai fait personnellement l'expérience.[6]

The curé d'Ambicourt had said, "Toutes les brèches ouvrent sur le soleil,"[7] but for Mouchette, " ... la brèche ... ouverte du désespoir ... n'est sans doute l'autre ressource ... que le suicide, le suicide du misérable, si pareil à celui de l'enfant."[8] Solitude in poverty, as in childhood, leads straight to despair.

A little-noticed device in dramatizing Mouchette's swift flight to death is her hatred of music. "Elle hait ... toute musique d'une haine farouche inexplicable."[9] Yet it is primitive music which rises to her lips just before her sexual encounter with Arsene: " ... un air de danse ... de danse nègre ... Les paroles en sont incompréhensibles. Jusqu'alors, elle ne l'avait écouté qu'avec répugnance, mais il ne cessait de la hanter."[10]

It haunts her at the moment when she is on the brink of what she thinks will be love, although "cet émerveillement n'était pas sans angoisse,"[11] and even while caught up in the bizarre melody, she daydreams prophetically, in terms of physical falling: " ... engagée sur une pente de neige,

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[6]Jessie Lynn Gillespie, Le Tragique dans l'oeuvre de Georges Bernanos, p. 64.

[7]Bernanos, Journal d'un Curé de Campagne, p. 94.

[8]Bernanos, La Nouvelle Histoire de Mouchette, p. 217.

[9]Ibid., p. 4.

[10]Ibid., p. 74.

[11]Ibid., p. 75.

elle perdait presque aussitôt conscience de la vertigineuse descente."[12] Preliminary to the unsatisfying sexual union, she anticipates liberation, but the primitive rhythm suggests an almost muscular promise of ensnarement, without words.

The night with Arsène begins after she yields to her desire to escape from her school companions, "d'enjamber sournoisement la haie, de filer droit devant soi, dans la nuit."[13] This moth-to-flame image, which first suggests Mouchette's coming fate, is intensified when she returns soaked by the cold rain: "Sa robe ... un suaire de glace."[14] The image is ominous, though Mouchette is not yet conscious of what a few hours will bring.

> ... la mort elle-même Mouchette y pense comme à un événement bizarre, aussi improbable, aussi inutile à prévoir que, par exemple, le gain fabuleux d'un gros lot.[15]

Her solitude and confusion deepen after Arsène becomes "le ravisseur de sa chair,"[16] and she realizes that he regards her not with love, but with indifference and contempt. One clear thought emerges, among the jumble of images and dreams: "O maudite existence, qui ne veut mourir!"[17]

She instinctively feels that her sordid union is "la hideuse erreur où a sombré d'un coup sa jeunesse, ... celle qui, hier, ... attendait de

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[12] Ibid., p. 76.

[13] Ibid., p. 9.

[14] Ibid., pp. 25-26.

[15] Ibid., p. 19.

[16] Ibid., p. 109.

[17] Ibid., p. 190.

se débander de l'enfance, de naître au jour ... "[18] In her growing self-hatred she, like the first Mouchette, turns to lie for survival in defiance, "car mentir est le plus précieux, et sans doute l'unique privilège des misérables."[19] Bernanos reveals his compassion by referring to Mouchette's lust as erreur and to her lies as almost necessary.

The death of her mother later the following day deepens Mouchette's solitude, perhaps at the moment when a desire to confide would have penetrated her growing web of refusal. "Maman, ... faut que je te dise ... "[20] but, "la morte n'a rien entendu."[21]

Mouchette's incoherent swirling toward fate, in "le grand fleuve noir et grondant ... "[22] now begins to assume a form, and some meaning: " ... la révolte demi-consciente, qui est l'expression même de sa nature, a un sens intelligible. Elle est seule, vraiment seule aujourd'hui, contre tous."[23] But her solitude, her rigid posture of revolt, her self-hatred at the threshold of youth, are parts of an integral process with a definite end.

> Elle obéit à une loi aussi fixe, aussi implacable que celle qui régit la chute d'un corps, car un certain désespoir a son accélération propre ... elle ira jusqu'au bout de son malheur.[24]

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[18] Ibid., p. 113.

[19] Ibid., p. 114.

[20] Ibid., p. 139.

[21] Ibid., p. 140.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., p. 146.

[24] Ibid., p. 156.

The lie is the instrument of the smooth functioning of the process, and Bernanos, who hates the lie almost obsessively, is tender with this young sauvage as was Donissan with the first Mouchette. But whereas Satan was explicitly operative in the first Mouchette, it is the world which lessens the second Mouchette's guilt.

The woman who prepares Mouchette's mother for burial understands death and intuits the imminent fate of Mouchette: "Tu allais mal faire. Tu as le mal dans les yeux."[25] In the presence of this strange, calm peasant, who speaks lovingly of death and the dead, Mouchette is silent, and makes no effort to escape "l'étrange douceur dont elle est en ce moment la proie, et qui parait tisser autour d'elle, diligente, patiente, les fils d'une trame invisible."[26] Mouchette hears the woman completely at ease with the mystery of death, discussing its physical terror earthily:

> Tu me diras que les morts ne sentent pas bon. Bien sûr. Quand le cidre bout, il est aussi horrible qu'un pissat de vâche. La mort comme le cidre doit d'abord jeter son écume.[27]

She refers, of course, to a beautiful life after death.

After the old woman has spoken, the black river is ready to deposit Mouchette "dédaigneusement sur la grève."[28] She wanders to a stagnant pool in the sandy hills above her village, filled with the

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[25] Ibid., p. 181.

[26] Ibid., p. 183.

[27] Ibid., p. 186.

[28] Ibid., p. 147.

words of the woman who alone could say, "Je connais déjà ton histoire."[29] The water lapping against the sandy bank has formed a sort of grotto, in front of which stands a sign forbidding trespassing. Boys have covered the sign with obscene drawings, and its shadow in the moonlight forms a cross along the pale back wall of the grotto. Mouchette has no idea why she has come here, anymore than why her life has been scarcely more than "la révolte ... , le refus à peine conscient ... "[30] She only knows that "à la limite de la fatigue, il arrive qu'elle se cache exprès à la place la plus boueuse de la route."[31] But once in this place, under the shadow of its hideously merged symbols, she relishes her own disgust knowingly for the first time, " ... avec une lucidité qu'elle n'avait jamais connu, qui lui paraissait merveilleuse."[32]

As she had imagined her lover to have fled to a mysterious, peaceful pays libre, she now imagines that she understands the word death "comme si elle l'entendait pour la première fois."[33] Perhaps in death she will find "l'imminente révélation d'un secret, ce même secret que lui avait refusé l'amour."[34] As in the case of the first Mouchette, an advanced stage in an evil, spiritual process is designated as "knowledge."

At this point in the novel Bernanos denies that suicide is "la

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[29] Ibid., p. 183.

[30] Ibid., p. 203.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., p. 204.

[34] Ibid., p. 205.

conclusion d'un débat suprême entre l'instinct vital et un autre instinct, plus mystérieux, de renoncement, de refus,"[35] and claims that "le geste suicidaire reste un phénomène inexplicable d'une soudaineté effrayante."[36] Nonetheless, it can be seen that Mouchette's disillusionment with Arsène is a prelude for the final romantic choice over which she has control, which she can actualize with deliberation.

As she approaches the moment of "cèt événement mystérieux,"[37] she searches her memory for what her childhood has been, but fruitlessly, "car ainsi que tous les êtres nés sous le signe du rêve, ses premières années n'étaient au fond de sa mémoire qu'un paysage de brume."[38] Remarkable contrast with the conscious, deliberate abandonment of childhood and existence of the first Mouchette!

Mouchette does recall one caress when she was ten years old, from an older girl who had bumped into her accidentally: "Elle avait posé contre sa joue une main douce et distraite."[39] So strong had the impression of kindness been that during the night, "crut-elle sentir l'imperceptible parfum de la main tiède ... Si proche, si vivante, qu'elle avait jeté la tête en avant, fronçant ses lèvres pour un baiser."[40] This memory floats away, and Mouchette is touchingly helpless minutes before her

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[35] Ibid., p. 207.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., p. 205.

[38] Ibid., p. 209.

[39] Ibid., p. 210.

[40] Ibid., p. 211.

suicide: "Elle leva les yeux vers le paysage familier avec le vague souhait d'y trouver une défense, un appui."[41]

Now Mouchette lies in the stagnant dark water, which fills her ears as she fixes her eyes on the highest point in the sky, and "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."[42]

Bernanos' relish in Mouchette's suicide seems to approach the morbid, yet the implication for her is salvation by a merciful God, who forgives much to les misérables, and who will visit his wrath on a world which destroys his Mouchettes.

The second Mouchette is not thrust toward ontological Nothingness and then dramatically caught up by supernatural power. She is flotsam caught in the black river of fate, who simply kills herself. She is important in Bernanos' universe, though exactly because neither children nor the poor should be allowed to become flotsam.

The freedom of choice by which the first Mouchette saved herself from childhood is all but absent in the second Mouchette. Thus her death loses, somehow tragically, the grandeur that Bernanos considers essential for death. Grandeur is replaced by black romanticism, which fails to become pathos due to Bernanos' palatable and convincing compassion for the millions of human beings of whom the second Mouchette is a starkly real symbol, and who will enjoy "la douce pitié de Dieu,"[43] without measure.

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid., p. 223.

[43] Bernanos, Journal d'un Curé de Campagne, p. 249.

This is the pity that restores childhood to the Mouchettes and that will conquer fate, which now lies all about us victorious and blind.

One senses genuine pity in Bernanos, and a deep grasp of the Christian notion of compassion, but that peculiarly human pity which gives real life to a character in a novel is virtually limited to the cure d'Ambicourt among all the characters created by Bernanos.

Mouchette's progression towards total internal abandonment enlightens the idea of passionate justice where an abscence of eros prevents the life a young child "sans amour ... mais un grand Amour (Agapé) veille ... "[44]

44Gillespie, p. 107.

Instead of adolescents who have fled from childhood, here are adults who have remained faithful to childhood, and whose effect on each other contrasts markedly with the personal interactions so far analyzed here. These two characters have this in common: they have remained intact in childhood in a way that sets them apart, and that forces them to throw themselves forward to the point of total anguish, toward sharing the suffering of les misérables. The second Mouchette was one of les misérables who never knew the warmth of love, who though a child, had not been given the spirit of childhood by the world which surrounded her from her beginnings.

The mistress of the defrocked duFréty is a replica of Mouchette in every way but one: she loves, that is to say, she remained a child. As there was a satanic fecundity of despair in the aura of M. Ouine, and total, fatal solitude in the second Mouchette, there is a marvelous fecundity of love and wisdom in the aura of the curé d'Ambicourt and this simple woman.

As she speaks to the dying priest, he hears "la voix sans âge, la voix vaillante et résignée ... , toujours pareille à travers les siècles, la voix qui tient tête à toutes les misères du monde ... "[1] Remembering his battle against full rebellion he knew would have led to despair, he queries humbly, "N'êtes-vous jamais tentée de vous révolter?"[2] The woman as victim replies simply, "Non, seulement, des fois, je n'arrive

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[1]Georges Bernanos, Journal d'un Curé de Campagne, p. 244.

[2]Ibid., p. 245.

plus à comprendre."[3] It is the sublime reply of "sa douce race promise depuis les siècles des siècles au couteau des égorgeurs."[4] Here is neither satanic "knowledge" nor superstitious scurrying for the darkness, but sublime acceptance of non-comprehension that cannot be eliminated.

The uncultured woman speaks of children with a wisdom that she very likely does not realize she possesses: "Les enfants, voyez-vous, il n'y a pas meilleur, les enfants, c'est le bon Dieu."[5]

When the second Mouchette thought of children she thought of a squalor, filth, and a brutal alchoholic father. When she was incapable of facing that milieu, she fled into long, solitary night walks. DuFréty's mistress, however, instinctively follows another path, and a completely opposite process is generated.

> Je pense à tous ces gens que je ne connais pas, qui me ressemblent ... les mendiants qui battent la semelle sous la pluie, les gosses perdus, les malades, les fous des asiles qui gueulent à la lune, et tant! et tant! Je me glisse parmi eux, je tâche de me faire petite, et pas seulement les vivants vous savez? Les morts aussi, qui ont souffert, et ceux à venir, qui souffriront comme nous ... Dans ces moments-là, je ne changerais pas ma place pour celle d'un millionaire, je me sens heureuse.[6]

As duFréty's mistress is to the second Mouchette, so is the curé d'Ambicourt to M. Ouine. The saint at the moment of his conversation with duFréty's mistress is also "hors de jeu,"[7] but as one of the elect.

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 251.

[5] Ibid., p. 245.

[6] Ibid., p. 246.

[7] Ibid., p. 247.

And instead of an enormous lust for childhood, he has it as a precious gift.

> Pour la première fois depuis des années ... il me semble que je suis en face de ma jeunesse, que je la regarde sans méfiance. Je crois reconnaitre son visage, un visage oublié. Elle me regarde aussi, elle me pardonne.[8]

Confidence exchanged with duFréty's mistress provides the setting for the final sublime moments of a man who has remained a child, who now gains peace in self-regard:

> L'espèce de méfiance que j'avais de moi, de ma personne, vient de se dissiper. Cette lutte a pris fin. Je ne la comprends pas. Je suis reconcilié avec moi-même, avec cette pauvre dépouillé.[9]

From the illuminated intensity of his dying words can be seen the existence of childhood bearing fruit among les misérables, by means of Agapé, which melts away solitude and transforms poverty from squalor to at least simple hopefulness. For the awkward curé, the gratuitous joy of the end of his drama is counterbalanced by the sadness of a final realization: "J'ai beaucoup aimé les hommes, et je sens bien que cette terre des vivants m'était douce. Je ne mourrai pas sans larmes."[10]

Bernanos' favorite character, the country priest, the man who has remained as a child by loving, and who discovers only as he approaches death how free he has been throughout what seemed imprisonment, how radiant was the light in the darkness of solitude, in which his love was returning to him, multiplying around him, preparing him for this day when childhood, reconciliation, and death are given to him as one.

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[8] Ibid., p. 248.

[9] Ibid., p. 252.

[10] Ibid., p. 250.

In great suffering and anguish, following a violent hemorrhage, the priest held his rosary to his breast. When he asked for absolution his request was granted and the ritual performed, in a manner. The priest's last words affirmed his great faith in the whole scheme of things, because of God's existence.

Inspired by the spirit of Agapé, childhood and existence dominate Bernanos' novels. The genius in Bernanos for putting new wine in old skins, in enjoying the prerogatives of traditionalists and iconoclasts, must be at the periphery of the deep intuition that places the mystique of childhood and existence in the central position it has been seen to occupy in his novels.

Bernanos answers in his novels the following question: "What does happiness consist of?" Not of wealth, for according to the Christian Existentialist, no matter how much a man has, he wants more; material goods fail to satisfy the spiritual existence of the human being. Happiness is not found in power either, for power and glory are given to the undeserving as well as to the deserving, and that spoils man from his existence; furthermore, power and glory will not keep a man from giving way to lusts that can destroy him.

Bernanos agrees with Aristotle that all men love happiness, but the usual goods which men pursue neither consist in happiness nor bring happiness. Even pleasure is not happiness, for it enslaves a man and turns his attention away from what could make him happy. Bernanos' novels show that only the sovereign God is true goodness, happiness and blessedness. Anything else which is ever good, such as power, fame and pleasure, is good because it is not in addition to, but part of, the blessedness which is God.

The novels of Georges Bernanos at best and deepest are the tough but delicately formed children of that union: the beautiful offspring of Agapé enduring so long as literature remains human.

Finally, let us grant without wonder a harmony of intellect and intuition in Bernanos which brought him to a not uncommon creative usage of Woman, Intellect and Child. But the one valuable discovery in this paper is that he should place Childhood as deeply and centrally as he does in the inner structure of his novels, so that upon retaining or losing Childhood hinges the very existence, not to mention the outcome, of the drama which alone has meaning for the novelist: achieving Being or plunging into Nothingness. Although theology and the traditional accoutrements of the novelist have now been found virtually defenseless, my question, by which I hope that the thesis may finally come to a point where it opens out rather than closes, is this: Can there be any real literature of man in which Childhood and Existence are not ultimately the key to whether men will be or will not be?

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