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Some Approaches to Anguish in Pre-1950 French Literature

by George J. McKenzie, S.M., Ph.D.

For sometime now, we have not heard much about the “anguished generation.” Our newspapers and magazines are busy recording the deeds—whatever we may think of them—of the anguished generation rather than the basic motive that prompts them. It is safe to assert, however, that anguish is still very much with us. There are numerous factors at work generating it. There is the threat of atomic warfare, which according to Secretary of Defense McNamara could wipe out most of the American people, and on the other hand, a perhaps even greater number of the enemy. Again whole sections of cities have recently burst into resentful and destructive orgies to dramatize the intolerable situation resulting from the poverty and the frustration that plague them. Negro marches and demonstrations for Civil Rights are rolling on in gigantic volume. Taxes are lowered then raised again; the price of living has skyrocketed to unprecedented heights. Draft calls are increasing and protests against governmental action both domestic and foreign are on the increase. There are continued attacks on established authority. Some are espousing radical causes of the right, others of the left, in an effort to satisfy their desire for personal security.

All these phenomena are only so many facets of the moral anguish that continues to gnaw at the vitals of contemporary society.

Now, anguish is nothing new and its presence in the world is commensurate with the history of mankind. Perhaps it has come to the fore in our day because men by and large have tended to take for granted the implications of Nietzsche when he said that God is dead.

It is interesting to see how modern man has tangled with this crushing problem. In this paper I should like to present a brief picture of how some twentieth century French novelists and playwrights have dealt with this same problem. Two centers of feeling and thought are clearly discernible: the existentialist and the Christian.

But before going into detail on this point, it might be well to establish a workable definition of the term anguish. Webster's new International Dictionary states that the word anguish is derived from the Latin *angustia* which means narrowness, and in the plural, straits or distress. More popularly anguish is defined as an agonizing or excruciating pain of mind or body; again it may be acute suffering or distress.¹

¹ Webster's *New International Dictionary of the English Language* (2d ed.; Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1960), p. 104.

A dictionary definition does not of course exhaustively characterize the concept of anguish since in the philosophy of Kierkegaard and his followers, as well as in that of St. Augustine, and French Catholic writers like Georges Bernanos, who follows the Augustinian tradition, and who in this paper will represent the Catholic approach to anguish, this term suggests many additional overtones.

To begin with, the years just before and after World War II witnessed the growing popularity of the existentialist philosophy. This school of speculation, veering from the contemplation of pure essences, turned its attention to the concrete, the dispossessed, the estranged or the problematical man, one of whose main afflictions is anguish of spirit. These philosophers naturally found food for thought in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard.

With Kierkegaard, an important forerunner of modern Existentialism, anguish, which he equates with dread, emerges as a paramount issue. He is careful to make it clear that anguish differs from fear; for fear arises from disturbance in the presence of a perceived menacing object, whereas anguish or dread is a fear of oneself, a fear of nothingness.

The following quotation summarizes the previous assertions and simultaneously stresses the role of freedom which plays such a prominent part in later existentialists like André Malraux and Jean-Paul Sartre:

One almost never sees the concept dread dealt with in psychology, and I must therefore call attention to the fact that it is different from fear and similar concepts which refer to something definite, whereas dread is freedom's reality as possibility for possibility. One does not therefore find dread in the beast, precisely for the reason that by nature the beast is not qualified by spirit.²

Kierkegaard then explains the mechanics of dread. In the first place it is not incompatible with innocence; for before the dawn of experience of any kind, man is innocent of soul. It is then the spirit dreaming that projects a kind of non-ego the presence of which immediately produces dread or anguish. Kierkegaard explains:

In this state there is peace and repose; but at the same time there is something different, which is not dissension and strife, for there is nothing to strive with. What is it then? Nothing. But what effect does nothing produce? It begets dread. This is the profound secret of innocence, that at the same time it is dread. Dreamingly the spirit projects its own reality, but this reality is nothing, but this nothing constantly sees innocence outside of it.³

2 Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 38.

3 *Ibid.*

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In all existentialist philosophies anguish cannot be rationally understood or explained. The object of this anguish cannot be named or sharply defined; for if it could, man might defend himself, obviate the danger that threatens him, and once again arrive at security. As one modern philosopher put it:

In existential anguish man's relationship to the world is totally shaken and becomes wholly questionable. Something utterly mysterious intervenes between him and the familiar objects of his world, between him and his fellowmen, between him and all his "values." Everything which he had called his own pales and sinks away, so that there is nothing left to which he might cling. What threatens is "nothing" (no thing), and he finds himself alone and lost in the void. But when this dark and terrible night of anguish has passed, man breathes a sigh of relief and tells himself: it was "nothing" after all. He has experienced nothingness.⁴

For Kierkegaard, then, what constitutes the object of nothingness is the nothingness of the non-ego; for Sartre, *l'en-soi*. It is the Dane's contention that anguish and nothingness are correlative. Anguish, accordingly, is the effect of experiencing nothingness; and with Heidegger, anguish excites man from the false quiet of his every day life and leaves him free to accomplish his existential tasks. Here, again, the role of freedom in self-determination is underscored. Thus anguish becomes the expression of the perfectibility of human nature. It does away with false security and gives man over to that complete abandonment in which "authentic existence" originates. In passing through anguish, man, according to the existentialist, attains to a new kind of security, "a hold in the infinite," as Jaspers put it.⁵

But before man reaches this stage of security, he must undergo a period of estrangement from a hostile objective world. The non-ego, as it were, besieges the ego which, bolstered by technology and science, had originally felt itself to be the conqueror and master of material things. Now, on the contrary, after so many wars, revolutions and economic disasters, man witnesses the hostility of the non-ego against the ego, and this aggression fills him with trepidation and fear. As Reinhardt says, man

faces the "totally other" which calls in question himself, his thinking, his doing, and his "values." "Being-in-itself" begins to oppress him like a nightmare, seizing and enveloping him with an iron grip. The constructs of abstract rational thought are tumbling.⁶

4 Kurt F. Reinhardt, *The Existentialist Revolt* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1952), p. 235.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, p. 233.

Because everything that he has held sacred until now seems to vanish into thin air, man views the universe, or the non-ego, as an absurd entity. A contemporary philosopher of Christian existentialism, after describing the sad resignation that characterizes the facial features of this dispossessed creature, who once enjoyed the friendship of a wife, children, parents and neighbors; who formerly owned a house and land and the wherewith of a livelihood, has emerged from the ravages of World War II looking very much like The Man With A Hoe:

. . . Il parle peu, toujours lentement, avec retenue. Il parle de ce qu'il a possédé naguère, des siens, de sa ferme, et par là il redevient un être humain *au présent*, bientôt il retombe dans son mutisme. Mais auparavant il a posé une question, toujours la même, et il ne s'attend certes pas à obtenir une réponse: "Qui suis-je? demande-t-il, pourquoi est-ce que je vis, et quel sens a tout cela?"⁷

Marcel here points up the confusion and despair of the man who has suffered total deprivation as a result of the war. Such a man has experienced the existential absurdity of life to the very dregs. Before him the universe seems to remain silent when with anguish he ponders the question: "Who am I? Why am I alive?" The hostility of the non-ego is all too evident here.

The estranged man of existentialism is the full-flowering of the hunted hero that gradually appeared in French literature even before the outbreak of World War II. The genesis of this hero deserves a brief word of explanation. His appearance in the novel is bound up with the gradual manifestation of a new literary climate.

The generation of writers that sprang up after World War I came into a heritage of emancipation partially prepared by André Gide, Charles Péguy and Henri Bergson. This is the period that marks the opening of the "Roaring Twenties." Bergson's part in the new age is more significant than usually thought; for it was Péguy who saw in this philosopher of the *élan vital* a modern champion who dealt mortal blows to those mythical giants of the nineteenth century: positivism, materialism and determinism. Loosed from the fetters of the old ideologies that had supposedly set restraints on the human spirit, the new generation, still bewildered by its inheritance of broad freedom, experienced a siege of frustration at the ineptitude of society to challenge adequately the raw strength and the ambitions it felt surging wildly within itself. The literary firmament of those times flashes with countless pyrotechnics; there is evident an unmistakable taste for things, for life lived to the hilt, for the ecstasy of the actual moment. Yet through it all runs a thread of disturbance, of anxiety, manifested in such works as *Les enfants terribles* by Jean Cocteau, *Le diable au corps* by Radiguet, or *Etienne* by Marcel Arland.⁸

7 Gabriel Marcel, *L'Homme problématique* ("Editions Montaigne," Paris: Aubier, 1955), p. 12.

8 R. M. Albères, *Bilan littéraire du XX siècle* ("Editions Montaigne," Paris: Aubier, 1956), p. 64.

Toward the close of the decade, writers begin to view liberty as something more than a gratuitous act exercised in a meaningless void; it turns into a sense of responsibility aroused by the existence of dictators, or any ism that looms as a threat to individual freedom.⁹ It is at this point, in fact, that Andre Malraux's heroes appear on the scene. They will view with contempt the noisy, pointless fanfare and dissipation of their immediate predecessors; they will pass anew into the pitiless, scorching rays of self-appraisal to arrive at an even greater degree of authentic sincerity; they will, finally, burst the shackles of social routine to tangle unprotected with the awesome, forbidding monster of their personal destiny. One modern critic viewing the problem from the standpoint of a refusal of spineless conformity says:

Le refus de la vie donne, que ce soit socialement ou moralement(. . .),
aiguille l'homme sur une série de solutions nouvelles du problème de
sa nature et de sa fin.¹⁰

A new courage seems to make its presence felt; the threat to personal freedom launched by the dictators will not go unchallenged.

Since nothing must now intervene between man and his courage, between the harshness of the world and the human will, adventure fraught with danger is best calculated to bring out the best that is in man. This adventure, too, is a form of solitude favorable to meditation, a situation that permits man to return to the very roots of his inner being:

Dans la solitude et dans le péril se dévoile alors la condition humaine,
la vérité essentielle de l'homme que l'homme du commun ne voit se dé-
voiler que lorsqu'un drame le frappe et le fait tressaillir.¹¹

Herein lies the asceticism of the new sincerity: for its adherents find an opportunity for meditation on death in the very bosom of violent action and perilous risks. In the face of death, moreover, an idea, according to these novelists, falls into clearer focus; and the fruit of this insight is a new strength to resist death itself or any form of personal degradation. Reinhardt explains the matter as follows:

In the vertigo of the "fear of death" man is overcome by the dreadful thought of "being-no-more" and it is this experience which reveals to him the final and total threat to which his existence is exposed. But this fear of total annihilation may also have a very salutary effect: in existential perseverance in the face of the certainty of death man may reach

9 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

10 André Breton, "Le merveilleux contre le mystère," *Minotaure*, IX (mars, 1950), p. 25.

11 Albérès, p. 89.

an absolute "hold" beyond time and death. By forcing man to ask himself as to what is absolutely essential in his existence and by making him free and resolute in his action, death becomes the final challenge and supreme test of existence.¹²

The "adventure" requires that the hero be put in circumstances that are harrowing and even vile to allow him to see his ideals through to the very end. Kierkegaard himself implies this when he says of anguish:

If we observe children, we find this dread more definitely indicated as a seeking after adventure, a thirst for the prodigious, the mysterious.¹³

Anouilh's *Antigone* expresses this very thought: "Nous sommes ceux qui posent les questions jusqu'au bout";¹⁴ and a writer in wishing to see things through to the end is perforce constrained to push evil, ugliness, horror and even weakness to their limits to see what lies beyond them. This experience of the heroes going to the very end of things is in reality their despair, their anguish. To borrow a term from Mystical Theology, this "dark night" of the hero is the only means whereby he may be free; for according to Sartre, hope begins on the other side of despair.¹⁵

A universe, of course, that puts a man to such a rugged test, must, in the existentialist conception of things, be "absurd." This divorce between man and his own life, between an actor and the setting of the stage upon which he must act—such disproportion constitutes in fact the very essence of the "absurd."¹⁶ The "absurd" and the "despair" of the existentialist writers, it should be noted, are not just an attitude of complacency in pessimism. Rather do they tend to point up the distance between man's aspirations and the conditions in which he lives, or as Camus puts it:

. . . ce divorce entre l'esprit qui désire et le monde qui déçoit, ma nostalgie d'unité, cet univers disperse et la contradiction qui les enchaîne.¹⁷

The representation of man's miseries and misfortunes in existentialist literature is a preliminary step to their exorcism; for it is not, as a matter of fact, man's defeat that is admirable, but rather the winning back, the possession by the writer of man's destiny.¹⁸ It is only by getting a thorough knowledge and appreciation of his mis-

12 Reinhardt, p. 240.

13 Kierkegaard, p. 38.

14 Jean Anouilh, "Antigone," *Nouvelles pièces noires*, (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1946), p. 193.

15 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Les mouches," *Théâtre* (Paris: Gallimard, Copyright 1947), p. 102.

16 Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, (Paris: Gallimard, Copyright 1942), p. 35.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

18 André Malraux, *Les voix du silence* (Paris: La Galerie de la Pléiade, 1951), p. 74.

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erable condition that man can, according to Sartre, attain to true liberty.¹⁹ And from liberty won in this manner, a man becomes truly responsible. With Malraux, the heroes will therefore oppose everything that tends in life to nullify man: death, suffering, humiliation; with Camus, they will accept the fatality of man's misery but do their utmost to ameliorate the condition of human existence; with Sartre, they will do very nearly the same while exulting in their freedom, their solitude and their individuality like Orestes in *Les Mouches*.

The characters of the atheistic existentialists, then, are quite different from the traditional types of realistic literature who make their way through life amid sentimental adventures and psychological reactions. The Tchens, the Perkens, and the Hugos, characters in existentialist literature, are bent on reaching a state of soul which transcends material actions to put them face to face with an absolute—for them a point of no return. The way for them lies through the sordid, the base, the cruel and even death. The last step is the most significant of all, for it is at the same time their justification and their defeat: their justification, for it is the last point of witness to the greatness of their actions; their defeat, for the glory that it offers, dies with the heroes since only they, while they are yet alive, can offer this justification of their deeds. This is the tragic element that frustrates the existentialist hero, but which does not prevent him from seeing it through to the end. This fate is alike his anguish and his hope.

Now, representing the Christian outlook on anguish, where does Georges Bernanos fit into the picture so far delineated? From a first reading of his novels, the student might justly conclude that the misfortune and the misery that plague the souls of such characters as Mouchette in *Sous le soleil de Satan*, or the priest Cénabre in *L'Imposture*, are in substance no different from those that plague Tchen, or Hugo or Perken. And to a certain extent this judgment is on the surface quite correct. For anguish, whatever its provenance, manifests itself under similar aspects; there is in it something of despair, something of remorse, an inner void, a seeming fracture of the personality, and an apparent absurdity in the circumstances of life that either provoke or aggravate this anguish. Yet, it is not so much the external manifestations of anguish that are of prime importance in this discussion, as the immediate source from which they spring. The source of existentialist anguish has already been considered. But what is the source of this sentiment in a Christian writer like Bernanos?

The answer very briefly stated is sin—that fracture of the moral law, either proclaimed in the Decalogue or in the natural law written in the heart of man, that brings with itself a sense of remorse and a conviction of accountability to a higher judge. For to a Christian, only sin can engender despair, disgust and ultimate anguish. Free of sin, a man can hopefully bear all things.

The very idea of sin, however, is impossible without belief in a personal God. The disorders of which the characters in the novels and plays of the atheistic exis-

19 Sartre, p. 101.

tentialists are patently guilty could never in their view be called sin. On the other hand, the misdeeds of the characters in the novels of Bernanos are truly sinful on the very admission of the author himself. His whole concept of man in the world of time is based upon man's acceptance or rejection of grace. But grace in almost any theology is viewed as an antidote to human weakness and sin. And it was originally St. Augustine, the great Doctor of grace, who first introduced the conflict between sin and grace into literature with the publication of his *Confessions*. This is the opinion of Jean Guitton, an impressive authority on St. Augustine; he states:

Yet before St. Augustine the history of personal sin, which is now the theme of modern tragedy, the gradual invasion of the self by the flesh usurping in us the role of the spirit and attempting to justify itself, the adjustment effected between the various parts of the self, the coincidence of the moment of liberation with that of the most strenuous resistance, the fluctuations of the deepest self which refuses, at the last, to identify itself with the flesh, and which, at the very time when it effects its detachment from the depths of the good—this history had, as yet, found no literary expression.²⁰

This is the very struggle with which Bernanos fills the pages of his novels. He is not, like Sartre, content to witness to the anxieties and suffering of modern man on a purely materialistic level. Although a writer like Sartre has vitally portrayed the interior struggles of modern man in a succession of vivid experiences, this is in the final analysis no more than an experience of disintegration.²¹ Bernanos, on the contrary, will seek or at least imply in his novels a tendency toward the need of an integration in man on a plane manifestly higher than that which is merely material. It is here that Bernanos differs basically from the Existentialists, for he cherishes a deep hope for integration of personality, not in human power alone but in the divine. He strongly suggests the method of St. Augustine who in his *Confessions* held up to the world of his day a mirror of its misery. The dilemma of the inner division caused by anguish which is so characteristic of man in the modern novel, even in the Catholic novel, stands clearly revealed in the *Confessions*. For in its pages we find a soul, probably typical of many of its contemporaries, torn between two allegiances, the one carnal and the other divine. In fact, the fracture of his personality through sin seemed so real at times to Augustine that he declared:

For I still thought "that it was not we that sin, but that I know not what other nature sinned in us;" and it delighted my pride, to be free from blame; and when I had done any evil, not to confess that I had

20 Jean Guitton, *The Modernity of St. Augustine*, trans. A. V. Littledale (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1959), p. 14.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

done any, that Thou mightest heal my soul because it had sinned against Thee; but I loved to excuse it, and to accuse I know not what other thing, which was with me, but which I was not.²²

Guitton furthermore suggests that the influence of Augustine has endured throughout the centuries down to our own times in some of the literature of France. He says:

It is a fact that, with the separation of the East and the eclipse of Greek culture, Latin theology, derived from St. Augustine, dominated the Middle Ages, and inspired the Reformers. So from St. Thomas to Malebranche, from St. Bernard to Jansenius, the history of theology and philosophy was bound up with the fortunes of Augustinism, just as if this were a second tradition mingled with the first, as if it had given, on the threshold of the new age, a new version of the Christian message.²³

Again, among the examples he cites of the modern novelists who have manifested in their writings the spirit of Augustine are Francois Mauriac and Georges Bernanos. After discussing how Sartre, the existentialist, suggests Augustine during the latter's Manichaean period,²⁴ when the Bishop of Hippo was at a loss to conceive of existence save under the form of matter, Guitton adds:

We might draw other comparisons besides these; some, in fact, suggest themselves forcibly, as for example, that of the spirit prompting Saint Augustine with the general tone of the novels of Mauriac or of Bernanos.²⁵

What is this Augustinian spirit that is supposed to pervade the novels of these two moderns? It really consists in the concrete expression of all that intermediate activity in which a man's intellect gradually develops and the will comes to life. It includes the individual recollections, personal happenings and allied particular avenues of self-knowledge that make up the stuff of the history of a given human being. More than this, there is also involved in the personal history of a man, the fact of sin. This did not, for example, exist in writers before the time of Augustine. The Greeks, for instance, considered sin a mere character weakness which could in no way affect the wisdom of the superior soul at rest in perfect balance and undisturbed equanimity. For among the pagans the sense of personal sin was almost non-existent. But in our day, when as a result of the Christian tradition, the sense of sin is still a vital issue in many souls, a correspondingly strong tendency to follow a minutely historical

22 *Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Edward D. Pusey, D. D. (New York: Random House, 1949), p. 88.

23 Guitton, p. 80.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

procedure in the novel is the order of the day. Guitton summing up this point says:

Whatever the case may be, the wise man never sins, and could not. So, then, there is a mysterious link between the sense of (personal) evil and the sense of (historical) time; at every period when the sense of evil is alive, the sense of time is seen to be present. When the sense of evil grows weak, the sense of historical time, of the irreversible course of time marked out by particular events lessens correspondingly.²⁶

Guitton in analyzing the thought of Augustine on the genesis of the position of sin in man's misery and anguish, carries the reader back through time to the fall of Lucifer recounted in the Bible. Here, as Guitton points out, is the beginning of the unending clash between the love of God and the love of self. He says of this interior struggle in the heart of man:

It began with the creation of the angels, for Lucifer's revolt preceded that of Adam; but through the sin of the angel the moral order was split up into two communions, into "two cities," as St. Augustine says, of which one has love for its principle and the other self-love, the counterfeit of love. Evil was brought into the world through the warping of the will. The dichotomy will never come to an end.²⁷

It is this counterfeit of love, this preference of man to stop at the creature rather than rise to the love of the Creator that constitutes sin in the mind of Augustine, and which finds expression in the character developments of Bernanos. It is this same false love that generates anguish of soul according to both of these men. In the case of Augustine, this anguish of spirit as a result of immoral living is manifest in his *Confessions* especially at the point in his life when his conversion seems imminent. For example, his refusal to break with the past despite an inner conviction urging him to do so, brought disillusionment and mental torture to Augustine. He cries out in prayer to God:

O crooked paths! Woe to the audacious soul, which hoped, by foresaking Thee, to gain some better thing! Turned it hath, and turned again, upon back, sides, and belly, yet all was painful; and Thou alone rest.²⁸

Frustration and fear form part of Augustine's anguish as he finds himself powerless to effect a complete parting with his old ways. This distressing weakness haunts

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

²⁸ *Confessions of St. Augustine*, p. 117.

him through the days that witness the final change in his way of living. He confesses:

Thus was I gnawed within, and exceedingly confounded with a horrible shame, while Pontitianus was so speaking. And he having brought to a close his tale and the business he came for, went his way; and I unto myself. What said I not against myself: with what scourges of condemnation lashed I not my soul, that it might follow me, striving to go after Thee! Yet it drew back; refused, but excused not itself. All arguments were spent and confuted; there remained a mute shrinking; and she feared, as she would death, to be restrained from the flux of that custom, whereby she was wasting to death.²⁹

As the years go by, Augustine grows tired of trying to make excuses for his license; and exhausted by the struggle for inner peace, he exclaims:

Thus soul-sick was I, and tormented, accusing myself much more severely than my wont, rolling and turning me in my chain, till that were wholly broken, whereby I now was but just, but still was, held. And Thou, O Lord, pressedst upon me in my inward parts by a severe mercy, redoubling the lashes of fear and shame, lest I should again give way, and not bursting that same slight remaining tie, it should recover strength, and bind me the faster.³⁰

This is reminiscent of the grace that pursues Germaine Malorthy of *Sous le soleil de Satan* as she rushes headlong to her own destruction. She too is overcome by shame, disgust and frustration. But all this suffering amounts to a grace to save her from her love of self as far as Bernanos sees it. Referring to the help proffered her by Donissan—a help that was not immediately fruitful—Bernanos says:

De la lumière qui l'a percée de part en part—pauvre petit animal obscur—il ne reste que sa douleur inconnue, dont elle mourrait sans la comprendre. Elle se débat, l'arme éblouissante en plein coeur, et la main qui l'a poussée ne connaît pas sa cruauté. Pour la divine miséricorde, elle l'ignore et ne saurait même pas l'imaginer.³¹

Unlike so many of the characters portrayed by Bernanos in his novels, Augustine actually makes use of the grace given him. Under the divine influence his mind perceives clearly and his heart warms with unselfish love as he reads from St. Paul:

29 *Ibid.*, p. 159.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 164.

31 Georges Bernanos, *Sous le soleil de Satan* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1926), p. 218.

Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, in concupiscence.³²

Augustine has not need, for the moment, to read farther; for acting under the influence of grace he surrenders himself body and soul to the will of God. Later on he muses over this moment of change and asks with wonderment in his heart:

But where through all those years, and out of what low and deep recess was my free-will called forth in a moment, whereby to submit my neck to Thy easy yoke, and my shoulders unto Thy light burden, O Christ Jesus, my Helper and my Redeemer?³³

Augustine is here invoking very patently the mystery of grace—that divine help that might have caused him to will what he wanted, or abandoned him in his great struggle, or even failed to make its presence felt when he was ready to sunder the bonds of his personal iniquity. Hereafter he will underscore the importance of grace to eliminate frustration and fear, psychoses and despair. For, with Augustine, grace is the answer to man's misery; it is the true nemesis of anguish because it is the antidote to sin. But where is it to be found? In God, answers Augustine. But where is God to be found by groping man? Augustine makes a rejoinder that has become classic:

Too late loved I Thee, O Thou Beauty of ancient days, yet ever new! too late I love Thee! And behold, Thou wert within, and I abroad, and there I searched for Thee! deformed I, plunging amid those fair forms which Thou hadst made. Thou wert with me, but I was not with Thee. Things held me far from Thee, which, unless they were in Thee, were not at all. Thou calledst, and shoutedst, and burstest my deafness. Thou flashedst, shonest, and scatteredst my blindness. Thou breathedst odours, and I drew in breath and pant for Thee. I tasted, and hunger and thirst. Thou touchedst me, and I burned for Thy peace.³⁴

So man must, through the intermediary of grace, in the thought of Augustine, find and cling to God. Through the shambles of his ruinous past and the bruises of his personal mistakes he must cross over to God by a total surrender. Yet, in this life, no man is completely perfect spiritually. There will always, therefore, be some

³² *Confessions of St. Augustine*, p. 167.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

misery, some anguish. But man must stay with God; for elsewhere there is no victory. So Augustine concludes:

When I shall with my whole self cleave to Thee, I shall nowhere have sorrow or labour; and my life shall wholly live, as wholly full of Thee. But now since whom Thou fillest, Thou liftest up, because I am not full of Thee I am a burden to myself. Lamentable joys strive with joyous sorrows; and on which side is the victory, I know not. Woe is me! Lord have pity on me. Woe is me! lo! I hide not my wounds; Thou art the Physician, I the sick; Thou merciful, I miserable. Is not the life of man upon earth all trial. Who wishes for troubles and difficulties? Thou commandest them to be endured, but to be loved. No man loves what he endures, though he love to endure.³⁵

Hence, in the mind of St. Augustine, the cause of human anguish is basically sin—the deliberate refusal of the service that man owes to God. From this stems man's remorse, his disquiet of soul, his feeling of being adrift among the other creatures of the universe, his sense of frustration, and a certain determination to persevere in his state of misery instead of attaining to the freedom of spirit of the children of God. The very same view of the relation between man and his personal miseries is shared by Bernanos. It is man's drift toward materialism, his abdication of moral responsibility and his forgetfulness of God that account for the unhappiness, the unrest, the anguish that so characterizes the people of this generation.

The almost ubiquitous presence of anguished persons in the novels of Bernanos has, in fact, suggested this study. Beginning with his first novel, *Sous le soleil de Satan*, published in 1926 right down to *Monsieur Ouine*, the last of his novels, Bernanos has peopled his pages with a wide variety of anguished souls. There are, for example, Germaine Malworthy, the priest Donissan and Saint-Marin in *Sous le soleil de Satan*; the priest Cénabre, Pernichon and the saintly priest Chevance in *L'Impos-ture*; Chantal de Clergerie, her father and grandmother, the psychiatrist La Pérouse in *La joie*; surely all the characters almost without exception in *Un mauvais rêve*; Evangéline, the counterfeit priest in *Un crime*; Mouchette in *Nouvelle histoire de Mouchette*; the priest of Ambricourt, the countess, in *Journal d'un curé de campagne*; and finally the old man Vendomme and M. Ouine in *Monsieur Ouine*.

Louis Chaigne, who has devoted several pages to a study of Bernanos, corroborates this view when he says of the characters that Bernanos describes:

Le monde lui apparaît habité par le Mal. Le Mal, le surprend partout, dans le rictus satisfait d'un épais matérialiste, sur le front stigmatisé

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 221-22.

d'une pauvre fille, dans la voix et dans l'attitude d'un mauvais prêtre.
Il traverse une véritable vie humaine, peuplée de spectres et de fantômes . . .³⁶

It should not, however, be supposed, as so many casual readers of Bernanos have done, that he is especially preoccupied with and revels in the portrayal of evil for its own sake. For Bernanos this is merely a striking means to an important end. Like Augustine, Bernanos affirms and delineates in great detail the evil that a human being can actually perpetrate; yet that is not the final chapter in a sinner's story. For as Bishop Sheen says of St. Augustine:

The escape from frustration and psychoses, despair and fear for St. Augustine began by realizing that man is the only creature in the world who has a power of self-transcendence. As the plant could not be taken up into the higher life of the animal unless it dies of itself, and as the animal could not live in man unless it surrendered its animal existence, so too man could not live in God unless in some way he sacrificed that which kept him from God and accepted from above that organizing principle of divine-human life called grace. Putting together the two equating separables of human misery and Divine Mercy, he became the great Doctor of Divine Grace, for he knew grace experimentally, bearing witness to the way that it illumined the blind and cleansed the leper.³⁷

It is this conviction of Bernanos that links him closely to the great thinker of the fourth century. He is very conscious of the presence of grace in the universe. Does not the priest of Ambricourt exclaim as he dies in the impoverished surroundings of his friend the apostate priest: "Qu'est-ce que cela fait? Tout est grâce."?³⁸ Bernanos is, in fact, full of patience with and hope for the ultimate redemption of the hopeless sinners. In this connection one critic writes:

L'oeuvre de Bernanos n'est pas une plainte du péché, du moins si l'on ne voit dans le péché qu'une révolte. Le grand scandale n'est pas celui d'une âme que le monde tient pour criminelle; de certains crimes, il semble au contraire que Bernanos les considère sinon sans haine, du moins sans mépris. Mais une âme qui laisse perdre ce qu'elle avait

36 Louis Chaigne, *Vies et oeuvres d'écrivains* (Paris: Lanore, 1950), p. 104.

37 Fulton J. Sheen, in the introduction to *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Edward D. Pusey, D. D., p. XI.

38 Georges Bernanos, *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1936), p. 324.

d'unique et d'essentiel, qui tend vers le néant ou qui jamais ne fut autre chose que néant, voilà ce qui apparaît monstrueux à Bernanos. Aborde-t-il un personnage, on dirait qu'il n'ait plus qu'un souci, qu'un besoin: est-ce une âme vivante, est-ce un mort, cette Mouchette, cet *abbé* Cénabre, ce candidat à l'Académie? Question qui ne le lâchera plus, et qu'il nous imposera à chaque action, à chaque parole de ses héros. Il investit ses personnages avec une ruse coupée d'accès de violence; il flaire en eux ce néant, il le stigmatise d'avance; à le découvrir, il s'indigne et se réjouit sombrement; il n'aura de cesse qu'il ne les ait contraints à sentir ce néant, à l'avouer, à trembler devant leur propre vide — ou qu'il n'ait enfin découvert, sous maints replis et maintes trompeuses apparences, l'étincelle qu'y déposa une Grâce avare et capricieuse.³⁹

The great tragedy, then, as Bernanos sees it, is the fact that modern man is all too willing to sell his spiritual birthright for the proverbial “mess of pottage.”⁴⁰ How can a person, wonders Bernanos, who is destined for friendship with Divinity be satisfied to wallow in selfishness and feed on delusion? How can a soul made to live in a state of grace, which is friendship with God, allow itself to be dispossessed by the forces of evil and dwell in the intimacy of Satan? It would seem that Bernanos already in his first novel, *Sous le soleil de Satan*, sounds a warning to his generation, especially to his fellow Catholics, that the Faith will not brook neglect, nor will it tolerate any half measure in its practice. For Mouchette and Saint-Marin, for example, are people with dead faith; and for them the kingdom of grace is almost non-existent.

Unlike the Existentialist writers, moreover, Bernanos refuses to allow that events such as depressions and wars and concentration camps have grown beyond the capability of man to deal successfully with them; it is rather man who, like the franc, has depreciated in value. He, therefore, takes to task those modern writers who while unwilling to blame themselves for their incapacity in the matter of courage and honor, speak of the rigorous fatalities of history to cover their shame. In *La Liberté, pourquoi faire?*, Bernanos says:

Ils sont de plus enclins à nier l'histoire, à ne voir en elle que l'ensemble des fatalités historiques. Ceux qui n'osent pas invoquer franchement le déterminisme marxiste—comme les démocrates chrétiens par exemple—en appellent aux “aspirations des masses.”⁴¹

Yet Bernanos is not a reformer in the pejorative sense of the word. He can

39 Marcel Arland, *Essais et nouveaux essais critiques* (Paris: Gallimard, Copyright 1952), p. 114.

40 Georges Bernanos, *La Liberté, pourquoi faire?* (Paris: Gallimard, Copyright 1953), p. 42.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

exercise compassion for his neighbor and tries at times to excuse his aberrations. If modern man suffers anguish, says Bernanos, he is not entirely to blame; for, he continues, man today, chiefly the citizen of the democracies of the world, theoretically and supposedly enjoys freedom; yet in most cases, this freedom is merely nominal, since the citizen must conform to the demands of an economic system that tends more and more to dictate its own terms. This is, in reality, according to Bernanos, the power of Technocracy, a system of thought that will in the end swallow up the noblest human activity unless people wake up to its menace. Bernanos calls “imbéciles” those who support this technocracy with blind enthusiasm; their redemption from its spirit and baneful effects is, in his opinion, comparable to the supernatural salvation of man from damnation.⁴²

The very worst feature of economic totalitarianism, says Bernanos, is that it causes man to forget that he has a soul. This is due in part to all sorts of propaganda, like modern advertising, that concentrate man's interest and ambitions on materialistic values to the detriment of the democratic heritage that changed him from a serf into a free man. In the process, man loses his sense of conscience; and while he enjoys this false freedom, he sinks slowly into the quagmire of depersonalization and despair; the secular spirit thus stages its final triumph over religion:

Les âmes: On rougit presque d'écrire aujourd'hui ce mot sacré. Les mêmes prêtres imposteurs diront qu'aucune force au monde ne saurait avoir raison des âmes. Je ne prétends pas que la Machine à bouger les crânes est capable de déboussoler les âmes, ou de vider un homme de son âme, comme une cuisinière vide un lapin. Je crois seulement qu'un homme peut très bien garder une âme et ne pas le sentir, n'en être nullement incommode; cela se voit, hélas, tous les jours. L'homme n'a de contact avec son âme que par la vie intérieure, et dans la Civilisation des Machines la vie intérieure prend peu à peu un caractère anormal. Pour des millions d'imbéciles, elle n'est qu'un synonyme vulgaire de la vie subconsciente, et le subconscient doit rester sous le contrôle du psychiatre. Oh! sans doute, le psychiatre ne saurait être tenu pour responsable de cette bêtise, mais il ne peut pas non plus faire grand chose contre elle. La Civilisation des Machines qui exploite le travail désintéressé du savant est moins tentée que jamais de lui déléguer la plus petite part de son magistère sur les consciences.⁴³

Personal happiness and liberty of spirit, then, are not a matter for the psychiatrist; it is a question of the action of grace on the innermost fabric of a man's soul. This is perhaps why Bernanos fulminates at every opportunity he can find against the

42 Georges Bernanos, *La France contre les robots* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1947), p. 201.

43 *Ibid.*, pp. 217-18.

psychiatrist in his various novels. He cannot tolerate this “plumber of souls” to move into the sacred precincts of a man’s soul. He has the psychiatrist La Pérouse confess to Chantel de Clergerie that there is nothing more inane than a man who gives vent to his curiosity by invading the souls of others. He says:

—Il y a plus bête et plus cruel encore, fit M. de La Pérouse, c’est celui que j’appelle l’amateur d’âmes, le Maniaque qui vous attribue une conscience pour avoir le plaisir de descendre dedans, d’y apporter son propre mobilier . . . Chacun de nous s’arrange avec sa part de vérité et de mensonge . . . Moi-même. ⁴⁴

This is perhaps, again, precisely the great malice of Bernanos’ last romanesque creation, M. Ouine. Despite a whole lifetime of acting according to his own whims and satisfying an insatiable curiosity, Ouine who has thoroughly ignored the voice of conscience cannot in the final analysis stifle it; “the worm” will gnaw on and on to the very last moment of his life.⁴⁵ And in the end, his soul, which according to Bernanos is the *sine qua non* of the interior life and of eternal values, swallows up the dissipated consciousness of the old man—that rich skein of finally unrequited desires that took a whole lifetime to weave. In the last analysis, every man must enter into himself, Bernanos seems to say; and the experience is a horrowing one. Just before his last breath, Ouine says to the young Steeny:

Je viens de passer un sacré moment, fit-il avec un énorme soupir. Rentrer en soi-même n’est pas un jeu, mon garçon. Il ne m’en aurait pas plus coûté de rentrer dans le ventre qui m’a fait, je me suis retourné, positivement, j’ai fait de mon envers l’endroit, je me suis retourné comme un gant.⁴⁶

Thus the Catholic literary writers are insistent to point out that this is the anguish that comes to man when through his own or another’s fault he cuts away from himself the grace of God which is the true life of the soul and the condition for man’s happiness. For whoever perseveres in this rejection of God remains an enemy to His works; and these works in turn—the *en-soi*—that were meant to be an avenue to God become an “absurd” meaningless jumble.

Conclusion

The anguish that besets the hearts and minds of countless thousands of people the world over is a phenomenon that has captured the attention of some of the fore-

44 Georges Bernanos, *La Joie* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1929), p. 219.

45 Georges Bernanos, *Monsieur Ouine* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1946), p. 145.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 244.

most writers and thinkers of the last forty years. The French, through the publications of Jean-Paul Sartre before, during and after World War II, called particular attention to the problem of the modern anguished man who has suffered the attack of a “hostile” and “absurd” universe. The professions of Sartre were not a surprise to readers of French novels and drama since they had been gradually prepared for them by the very untraditional novels of men like Malraux, Camus and André Gide who concentrated their talent to exposing the problem of individual liberty in a highly complex and hostile world. Most of these authors have existential dimensions in their writing; and most of them do point up the “absurd” universe in which man works out his destiny. These writers fairly well agree that man must strive and suffer and experience contradiction to arrive at a tolerable human condition. Their efforts to succeed ultimately bring them in contact with an absolute that is their reward. This absolute has the nature of a brief perception that allows the writer to possess his particular destiny, to take a “hold on the infinite,” to transcend material things — the *en-soi* of the Existentialist—and to contemplate the grandeur of their own spiritual dignity as men. This consolation, however, is fleeting and fugitive; death is the great harvester of all human striving, the silencer of human agitation, yet at the same time the measure of life’s values.

The French Catholic contemporaries of the Atheistic Existentialist men of letters take up the same problems as their opponents but emerge with a different answer. Their efforts are not all horizontal; they open doors and windows on the Supernatural Infinite. Man’s misery is a reality, they admit; yet he alone is the cause of his own anguish. For anguish comes as a result of personal sin and in the tradition of St. Augustine, they show how man perpetrates evil and his own doom, but that God is ever at hand with divine grace to supply an antidote to this misfortune. Once man attains to a state of grace, the whole *en-soi* becomes a further source of help; for God’s friends use things-in-themselves to do God’s will and promote His glory. Hence, the priest of Ambricourt in *Journal d’un Curé de Campagne* could before dying say with deep conviction: “Tout est grâce.” For the Christian writers on anguish, death is not only a stimulant to good, but the beginning of an ecstatic life without end.