

THE BLACK ILLNESS OF THE SOUL. A KIERKEGAARDIAN READING
OF THE DESPERATE PRIEST IN GEORGES BERNANOS

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Resumen

In the context of a fundamental Kierkegaardian heritage within Catholic theology, especially in the 20th century, my paper presents Søren Kierkegaard as an indispensable theologian in understanding the figure of the priest in two novels of the French writer Georges Bernanos, *Under the Sun of Satan* (1926) and *Diary of a Country Priest* (1936), starting from a few major Kierkegaardian concepts: preaching without apostolic authority, genius versus apostle, despair as the existential loss of the self, demonic despair, divine love, before God, living death.

Palabras clave: Catholicism, Protestantism, priest, despair, authority, sanctity, grace.

Abstract

En el contexto de una herencia kierkegaardiana fundamental dentro de la teología católica, especialmente en el siglo XX, mi artículo presenta Søren Kierkegaard como un teólogo indispensable para comprender la figura del sacerdote en dos novelas del escritor francés Georges Bernanos, *Bajo el sol de Satanás* (1926) y *Diario de un cura rural* (1936), partiendo de algunos conceptos kierkegaardianos importantes: predicar sin autoridad apostólica, genio contra apóstol, desesperación como pérdida existencial de sí mismo, desesperación demoníaca, amor divino, existir ante Dios, muerto en vida.

Keywords: Catolicismo, Protestantismo, sacerdote, desesperación, autoridad, santidad, gracia.

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*No wonder that a sufferer of that sort finally seeks the last
escape of despair and wants to put an end to this
agony – by beginning what awaits him in eternity!*¹

I. Clerical Vocation v. Preaching/ Writing Authority

The novels of the French writer Georges Bernanos² are a place of dialogue and of correspondence-existence between the Catholic tradition and Søren Kierkegaard, a reviewer of Protestantism and a critic of Christendom. Although many commentators and modern philosophers believed that Kierkegaard's interiority was profoundly Catholic or that his corrective faith was driven towards Catholicism (in a mysterious or in an anonymous way), his theology of creation and redemption finds its roots in Martin Luther's theological system. In his book *Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition. Conflict and Dialogue*, Jack Mulder Jr. writes about an unconscious dialogue in the case of the Dane, concerning the interchange between Protestantism and Catholicism: it is also interesting to note that "Kierkegaard agrees with Luther except where he explicitly or markedly departs from Luther or Lutheranism."³ As a matter of fact, Kierkegaard's Christianity is existential, intensifying Luther's dissemination. On the other hand, in *Catholic Theology after Kierkegaard*, Joshua Furnal examines the broader catholicity of the Lutheran structure of Kierkegaard's theological anthropology in the early 20th century leading up to the reform and renewal of the Second Vatican Council, and draws attention to the impressive Lutheran inspiration of Kierkegaard's writings, but also to the realism of Catholic spirituality. In the context of a fundamental Kierkegaardian heritage within Catholic theology or of an all-embracing conversation in the horizon of a protest inside Protestantism, this article presents Kierkegaard as an indispensable and fertile theologian in understanding the figure of the priest in two novels of G. Bernanos, *Under the Sun of Satan*⁴ and *Diary of a Country Priest*.⁵ Kierkegaard serving as sign or symptom of Catholicism, a

¹ S. Kierkegaard, "Part Three. The Gospel of Sufferings. Christian Discourses" in *UDVS (Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits)*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 311.

² Louis-Émile-Clément-Georges Bernanos, Paris, 1888 - Neuilly-sur-Seine, 1948.

³ Jack Mulder Jr., *Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition. Conflict and Dialogue*, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010, p. 1.

⁴ *Sous le soleil de Satan*, 1926.

⁵ *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, 1936, Grand Prix du roman de l'Académie française.

specter haunting these novels. Additionally, Kierkegaard never pretended to have an apostolic authority, meaning that he did not have the position to preach:⁶ his authority comes from a true devotion to God via an indirect communication, a communication in reflection, or perhaps from a divine revelation with a single witness, a single and central individual (Dan. *den Enkelte*) – *without authority*, a *reader* rather than an *author*. Writing and preaching without priesthood authority, Kierkegaard repeatedly insists that he is not a prophet; rather, he stands on the genius position. To build *up* (which indicates the direction in height) or to fortify or to edify the faith (which is not an intellectual approach) means to make persons aware of the religious, of the divine doctrine and make it enter the world.

Regarding the view of the apostles and the vocation of the pastor, Kierkegaard had a Catholic understanding: the apostle represented the exception, designated directly by Jesus, or called by God. There is also a difference between a human genius and an apostle;⁷ they are both associated with the Absolute (the religious), but the apostle speaks with authority (like the Apostle Paul, with a qualitatively decisive authority), whereas the genius does not (the example of a poet or of a philosopher evaluated purely esthetically). Accordingly, the first one claims a divine and unchanged authority⁸ or revelation, whereas the second deals with everything human. For Kierkegaard, a genius and an apostle are qualitatively different in immanence (a finite and temporal realm) and in transcendence (an infinite and eternal one): the inborn exceptionality of the genius vanishes when thinking of eternity, whereas an apostle remains for all eternity an apostle and receives a mission. *Contemporary* bishops or priests are thereby successors of

⁶ In his *Upbuilding Discourses*, texts closed in form and substance to the medieval and patristic treatises, Kierkegaard makes constantly the difference between discourse and sermon: “Although this little book (which is called ‘discourses’, not sermons, because its author does not have authority to *preach*, ‘upbuilding discourses’, not discourses for upbuilding, because the speaker by no means claims to be a *teacher*) wishes to be only what it is, a superfluity, and desires only to remain in hiding, just as it came into existence in concealment, I nevertheless have not bidden it farewell without an almost fantastic hope.” See the beginning of the preface in each of the six volumes that make up the eighteen upbuilding discourses in S. Kierkegaard, *EUD (Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses)*, ed. and trans., by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

⁷ For this paragraph, see Kierkegaard’s short essay “The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle” in *BA (The Book on Adler)*, ed. and trans., by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, pp. 173-188.

⁸ “Authority is a specific quality that enters from somewhere else and qualitatively asserts itself precisely when the content of the statement or the act is made a matter of indifference esthetically.” S. Kierkegaard, *BA*, p. 179

the apostles, but the *contemporaneity* required by Christianity is with Christ as a suffering man who is also God. The nature of the apostle is inscribed with a sense of martyrdom, silently facing the silence of God (as in Ingmar Bergman's film *Winter Light/ Nattvardsgästerna*, 1963) and silently opening oneself to the wounds of Christ; he bears witness, he conveys the revealed message properly and exists entirely for the sake of others: "The apostolic calling is a paradoxical fact that in the first and the last moment of his life stands paradoxically outside his personal identity as the specific person he is."⁹ In the Kierkegaardian acceptance, the affirmation *to be called by God* is a paradoxical life and death deposition (a *paradoxical heterogeneity*): the first apostles declared that they were sent by God. To be Christ, to be the son of God, this represents a scandal: Christ comes to earth as a man, but he declares that He is God. In this sense, the first apostles that followed Christ –who is a living and true prophet– accepted the scandal in their holy mission to become witnesses of Christ-God in front of the entire world for the assertive cause of an eternal life. It is a mission to proclaim the Word, to act and to suffer, as in the case of Bernanos's apostolic characters: "No genius has an in order to'; the apostle *absolutely paradoxically* has an in order to'."¹⁰ To be a witness means also to preach and to use the authority to preach, on account of *the depth and the profundity of the doctrine*.

As God-man, Christ possesses the specific quality of authority; no eternity can mediate this or place Christ on the same level with the essentially human likeness. Christ, therefore, taught with authority. To ask whether Christ is profound is blasphemy and is an attempt (be it conscious or unconscious) to destroy him in a subtle way, since the question contains a doubt with regard to his authority and attempts in impertinent *straightforwardness* to evaluate and grade him, as if he were up for examination and should be catechized instead of being the one to whom all power is given in heaven and on earth.¹¹

The paradox lies also in the fact that, since he belongs to the transcendent sphere of the religious, the apostle –just like other human– bears a *qualitative difference* in relation to God: the idea of God and that of man are completely and infinitely different. Kierkegaard considers that the only evidence of an apostle is his own statement, his own sufferance, and the willingness for his own persecution, moreover an eternal responsibility. At first glance, the eternal responsibility for the country priest in Bernanos's

⁹ Ibid., p. 176.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 188.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 182-183.

novels is to keep the parish *alive*, to struggle the concrete reality of evil, to be a Kierkegaardian mediator between doubt and faith, and even to reveal the saintliness of the hostile world. Considerably influenced by Kierkegaard, Bernanos, in his Catholic faith, portrays a priest who remains faithful to his vocation in opening the hearts of the believers to the love of God. His novels discuss, in a preaching manner, about the perils in a man's life when God is left out; Bernanos was influenced by the Danish theologian not only in the construction of the clerical hero as a sacrificial and greathearted creature, but also in the examination of the despair, which is defined as a failure to be or to become a self. The significance of despair is analyzed in the light of the Christian category of sin. Therefore, in Bernanos's novels, the sin can be fought only unsuccessfully, sometimes in a lack of religiousness, that is to say in a lack of forgiveness, peace or grace. In a "present" age of despair¹² –which lasted for more than one century, according to the literary movements of the 19th and 20th century: dark romanticism, realism, naturalism, *Fin de siècle* (symbolism and modernism, aestheticism and decadentism)– diagnosed by Kierkegaard with reflection and the annihilation of individuality,¹³ people should relate to God especially in a spiritual mode, keeping in mind that the character of Anti-Climacus, the pseudonymous author of *The Sickness unto Death* (edited by Kierkegaard in 1949), regards himself as a religious¹⁴ Christian and that Kierkegaard positions himself lower¹⁵ than him with respect to Christianity. To some extent and in the same atmosphere of despair, Bernanos discerns¹⁶ between his *priestly vocation* and his *directly chosen literary vocation*: he regrets not having listened to his desire and to the call of God in order to become a priest and to dedicate himself to an unceasing doubt; in this respect, the vocation of the writer becomes a spiritual adventure with Calvary accents. However, the writing vocation should be the other side of a clerical vocation: an analogue, not an alternative. In this sense,

¹² See Kierkegaard's entry in his journal from 1836, at 22 years old, about the despair of the present age, the despair of the age of the Wandering Jew.

¹³ S. Kierkegaard, *TA (Two Ages. The Age of Revolution and the Present Age. A Literary Review)*, ed. and trans., by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.

¹⁴ For Kierkegaard, *Religiousness A* (where the paradigm is Socrates) and *Religiousness B* (the task of becoming a self; Christianity) are two modes of ethico-religious subjectivity.

¹⁵ S. Kierkegaard, *SUD (The Sickness unto Death. A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening)*, ed. and trans., by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, xxiii.

¹⁶ In Albert Béguin, *Bernanos*, Paris: Seuil, 1982, p. 149.

Bernanos refused the name “romancier catholique” and he preferred to be called “un catholique qui écrit des romans” (Fr.). The two priests that I am going to analyse in this paper, father Donissan and the curé of Ambricourt, represent in their specific and inevitable martyrdom two alter-egos of the writer and two directions of sufferance towards sanctity and godliness in a French tradition of a Modern Catholicism. Their characteristics define Bernanos as a priestly writer or a sacerdotal novelist, who was close to a new trend in existentialism on the paths of Kierkegaard,¹⁷ rather than to the revival of Thomism. It is also important to note Bernanos’s interesting distinction between the Church of the visible and the one of the invisible: in fact, there are not two Churches, since the visible Church is what we can see of the invisible one according to our merits and to the grace of God.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Bernanos affirms that the saints are the most human of the human beings and that it is the sublime that needs them and not viceversa. Let’s not forget that for Kierkegaard saints were created out of sinners, that they will one thing, more specifically to die unto the world. The doctrine of renunciation doubled by the preparation to imitate Christ in laying down one’s life for others –*i.e.* suffering for the doctrine– is central in Bernanos: if one suffers for Christ, He will open to his martyrs a death without fear; in his own sufferance, Christ precedes us either in the darkness of mortal agony, or in the uncreated light of Creation:

How easy it is to hate oneself! True grace is to forget. Yet if pride could die in us, the supreme grace would be to love oneself in all simplicity –as one would love any one of those who themselves have suffered and loved in Christ.¹⁹

II. *Under the Sun of... Sanctity*

Kierkegaard and Bernanos conjoin in the description of a faith lived without compromise and in anxiety. Both writers take for granted despair as an existential condition, not only as a psychological one: despair as

¹⁷ For more details about Kierkegaard’s reception and revival in France, see the chapter “The Wider Catholic Reception of Kierkegaard’s Writings in the 20th century” in Joshua Furnal’s study *Catholic Theology after Kierkegaard*, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 67-104.

¹⁸ G. Bernanos, “Our Friends the Saints” in *The Last Essays of Georges Bernanos*, trans. by Joan and Barry Ulanov, Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955, pp. 219-243.

¹⁹ G. Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest*, trans. by Pamela Morris, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937, p. 296.

the existential loss (not lack) of the self, a loss doubled by the suffering resulting from this original loss. The loss of the self is equivalent to the loss of the Spirit, of the synthesis, the loss of the relation that relates itself to itself²⁰ which opens the *inwardness* of the individual in his task to become a Christian. The desire to become oneself denotes a Christian heroism. In Bernanos's novel *Under the Sun of Satan*, despair as *misrelation* is overcome by what is referred to as a *moral suicide*, the mortifications²¹ of the priest in the very arms of God, which rejoiced his heart. Although naked in front of God, Father Donissan²² (the saint of Lumbres in the role of the good shepherd) is the agonizing priest of an almost death parish which has to be guided through the realm of God. He is also "the conquerer of the abyss"²³ in terms of sanctity²⁴ or in relation to a divine eruption in a world dominated by sin and evil –his individual existence is firstly subjected to the Christian Catholic existence of the Word of God and, secondly, to his subjective experience as a holy person, a secular sanctity: "You do not know how much certain words upset me, and indeed on my deathbed and in my Saviour's bands, I could not hear them unscathed."²⁵ The sainthood at the beginning of the 20th century, in a self-consciously modern Catholicism of an unconscious form of despair, had to assume a renaissance in the hearts of the parishioners. To be in the centre of a history of redemption means,

²⁰ S. Kierkegaard, *SUD*, pp. 127-128.

²¹ The necessity of mortification for a priest: "Our poor flesh consumes suffering, as it does pleasure, with the same unfettered eagerness (...) Let us remember that Satan knows how to take advantage of too long a prayer or too harsh a mortification." G. Bernanos, *Under the Sun of Satan*, trans. by Harry L. Binsse, Pantheon Books, 1949, p. 102.

²² For an analysis of the unusual name of Donissan, see the article: Yves Baudelle, "Sous le nom de Donissan", *Société Roman 20-50*, 2008/ 3, no. 4, pp. 73-80.

²³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Bernanos: An Ecclesial Existence*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996, p. 29.

²⁴ Sanctity as the reconceptualization of the saint in the new genre of the Catholic European novel: "The rise of the Catholic novel led, naturally, to a number of novels about the saint –Catholicism's most privileged literary figure. Saints are always creations of language who live not primarily in lion's dens, but in discourse. Saints are not the people but narratives; sanctity is, from the historian's perspective, a genre. The saint is not described by a narrative, but rather constituted by it, at least as a cultural and social presence." James Chappel, "The Poetics of Sainthood in Interwar Catholic Literature: A Reading of *Sous le soleil de Satan* and *The Power and the Glory*", *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 2010, 88-4, p. 1230. See the second part of the novel, the chapter "The Saint of Lumbres" which is based on authentic documents. The figure of Donissan was inspired by le Curé d'Ars/ le saint Curé d'Ars: Saint John Vianney/ Jean-Baptiste-Marie Vianney, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Vianney.

²⁵ G. Bernanos, *Under the Sun of Satan*, p. 88.

for Bernanos, to create the unique figure of a priest inspired and touched not only by the Holy Spirit, but also by his personal gift of holiness. Various scenes show the supernatural effort of Donissan in trying to find life and sacramental value in the event of the confession. The confessional or the cabinet of the letters in extinction represents an event in itself where the priest dies continuously and repeatedly in an eternal Purgatory. In the confessional, in the moment of his death, Donissan abandons his *skin*, his mortal remainings and he becomes the man of the Cross by this true division in reconciliation:

It was not true peace, for true peace is only an equilibrium of forces, and inner certainty gushes from it like a flame. He who has found peace awaits nothing further, and he –this priest– was in expectation of heaven knows what new thing which would break the silence. It was not the weariness of an overwrought soul when it finds the depth of human sorrow and there takes its rest, for he desired something further. Nor was it the self-abasement of a great love, since in the release of the whole being the heart is watchful and wants to give more than it may ever receive... But he wanted nothing: he was waiting.²⁶

In Bernanos's thoughts, Donissan should simultaneously embody *a priest of the hearts* and a saint: actually, this priest can only be a saint, a saint thrown in the abyss of despair, handed over by God himself, a state of despair as vocation or divine call. Behind the desire to want nothing and to wait for something undetermined, there is the nothingness of an empty relentless dream world –a negative mysticism?– pointing to the (Kierkegaardian) fact that the devil, as well as God, cannot be depicted from the outside.²⁷ Based on Christ's descent in hell, Donissan's meeting with Satan occurs in a superhuman detachment according to the will of God and, according to Bernanos, in an intimacy more intimate than the one life itself seemed to suspend within him. In this exceptional meeting, in a moonless night of the darkest black, Donissan's elusive martyrdom became perfectly blended with his life. In this scene, one is struck by the impurity of the miracle: the ambiguity of revelation lies in the fact that the character does not know the provenance of the sign –devilish or holy; nonetheless, the encounter indicates the kenotic image of the incarnated Verb which facilitates the

²⁶ Ibid., p. 89.

²⁷ In his book *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian*, David R. Law writes that the human being knows God only through the inadequacy and the incapacity of human thought. The reality of God is grasped only in His hiddenness and incomprehensibility, which represents the mystery of the Incarnation. Thus, a direct and objective relationship with God is impossible.

birth of a saint. His heart felt a terror similar to the remembrance of an impure dream, of a sharp division in body and spirit. He saw before him his double, the lines and contours of his body appeared in the mirror in their three dimensions and he perfectly recognized himself not only in the present, but also in the past, in the future, in the wholeness of his life: “O Lord, are we thus transparent to the enemy who watches us? Are we given so defenseless to his pensive hate?”²⁸ Bernanos describes him as hanging in the air, in the aforementioned unreality of a dream; Donissan descended into himself and he saw himself as never before in the intimacy of his being; his soul was invaded by the expansion of the holy grace in an inexhaustible stream of brightness; he also received the gift of reading within souls – doubled by the gift to make violence or blasphemy in the sky– and some villagers interpreted it as the ecstasy and union in God of Saint Teresa or of Saint John of the Cross: “Thus supernatural man is at his ease as high as love bears him, and his spiritual life involves no dizziness the moment he has received the magnificent gifts, without his stopping to define them and even without his seeking to name them.”²⁹ It is an extreme love which has to condemn his own dying body, the blinding pain of his living flesh, an extreme love capable of forgiving the suicidal Mouchette (the first chapter of the book, “Mouchette’s Story”, a prologue and a preamble for the priest’s despair, the feminine character being an essential key to his despairing path). Perhaps Father Donissan must surrender himself to the devil in such an aim that the very demon should be overcome by the divine omnipotence and, consequently, by the victory of God. Perhaps his message is that the only inferno is represented by the Cross, so that the imitation of Christ is the only path to follow for the purpose of a clear difference between what comes from God and what comes from devil. Following Christ in thought and spirit appears as a kind of *vivisection*: being alive in a state of death. This is because the Dostoevskian or Faustian encounter³⁰ with the devil may require the same amount of blood like the desire to imitate Christ:

To him God yielded Himself for a time. In us is He clutched, devoured. From us is He wrested. For centuries, the human race has been placed in the press, our blood squeezed out in torrents in order that the tiniest particle of

²⁸ *Under the Sun of Satan*, p. 124.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

³⁰ In Maurice Pialat’s film from 1987, *Under the Sun of Satan/ Sous le soleil de Satan* (Palme d’Or at the 1987 Cannes Film Festival), the scene of the encounter with the devil is filmed in a dark azure, with German expressionistic notes, announcing the clair-obscur of the eternity and, most importantly, the physical impression of the supernatural.

the divine flesh might afford satiation and hilarious laughter to the dreadful torturer... Oh! our ignorance is deep! To a learned, well-mannered, prudent priest, what is the devil, I ask you?³¹

To follow Christ means to take up one's cross or to carry it: in his *Various Discourses*, Kierkegaard writes that it represents self-denial, meaning to walk the same road that Christ walked, with a joyful thought; this cross should be carried in obedience unto death and, very intriguing, "so that the imitator [Efterfølger], even if he does not die on the cross, nevertheless resembles the prototype in dying with the cross on'."³² In the Dane's opinion, Christ came into the world in a revealed but also in a hidden way, in order to transform humanity and especially the human sufferings into nothingness. It is important *to live* this contemporaneity with Christ, otherwise it is impossible to become a Christian. Christ took a human existence and renounced the divine glory to suffer for humanity: when a human being suffers, he is educated for (the idea of) eternity. Likewise, in the case of Bernanos's writings, a difference should be made between suffering for the Church and suffering through Christ: "The *mystical blood* which overflows from the heart of the Church and runs down in atonement over those armed with daggers, is a blood that flows in communion with him who, on the Cross, was the most solitary of all. It is the blood that pours into the chalice of the Church's Holy Sacrifice."³³ The future saint of Lumbres is conscious about the dreadful monotony of the sin which devours the life of the Christian: the sin is mysteriously procreated inside the closed and wounded human soul as the fibers of a cancer or the limbs of an octopus.³⁴ The sin is as sneaky or subtle as the air we breathe; for Kierkegaard, the sin is no greater than God because it is against/ before God; being before God –that is to say with the conception of God–, this makes sin even terrible. Besides, the sin means not to will to be oneself or to will to be oneself.³⁵ Once again in accordance with Kierkegaard (with Anti-Climacus more specifically), Bernanos makes

³¹ G. Bernanos, *Under the Sun of Satan*, p. 201.

³² S. Kierkegaard, "Part Three. The Gospel of Sufferings. Christian Discourses" in *UDVS*, pp. 221 & 223.

³³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Bernanos: An Ecclesial Existence*, p. 225.

³⁴ Bernanos's exquisite and psychoanalytic-like description legitimizes a connection between the priest, the figure of the melancholic and the persons affected by the Cotard syndrome (Walking Corpse Syndrome or Cotard's delusion, from the writings and case studies of the neurologist Jules Cotard). The patient believes that parts of his body are missing, that they are dying, putrefying, dead or don't exist anymore. Accordingly, to be possessed by the devil and to receive his gifts both suppose a melancholic delirium.

³⁵ S. Kierkegaard, *SUD*, p. 189.

a sacramental judgment of the sin and considers that it cannot be renewed, that there is no such thing as the fresh face of a sin, although the priest lives 1000 lives with each *new* sin:

A little while before he dreamed of escaping men, the world, universal sin; recollection of his useless great exertion, of his life's majesty, of his extraordinary loneliness were to cast over his death a final joy filled with bitterness –and here he was now, doubtful even of that exertion, here was Satan drawing him further down... He, the man of sacrifice? The marked and chosen victim?... Not in the least! Rather an ignorant madman, overexcited by fasting and prayer, a village saint, shaped for the wonderment of the idle and the dullards.³⁶

There is another interesting consonance between Kierkegaard and Bernanos regarding: on the one hand, the holiness which can be obtained only via humanness and, on the other, the demonic despair which brings the hero at both the possibility of salvation and of that of damnation; the character is not saved by the abolition of the despair, but by its transfiguration. For both Kierkegaard and Bernanos, in the examination of the self, the human being is not a fallen creature without hope, although each one must go beyond the dark night of the soul. And probably this aspect serves as an important and paradoxical argument for Bernanos's modernist Catholicism: the priest does not act in a metaphysics of being, his sanctity does not shine immaculately, instead he must overcome the temptation and the despair, the dark illness of his soul. Or, as even the devil in the novel put it, it is a darkness that brings people together. Father Donissan believed that his sainthood is of a demonic nature: he is wrapped in his anxiety as in a shroud, an explanation for the title of the novel. The sun of Satan is actually his horrifying and worldly envelope, his extreme anxiety. In a corresponding manner, Kierkegaard believed that the devil's despair is the most intensive despair (a sheer spirit, an unqualified consciousness, a transparency –Faust explained by Kierkegaard), the most absolute defiance, and, moreover, that sanctity requires knowledge of evil and the overcome of despair; this was possible only when Donissan kissed Satan. Initially, for Bernanos, despair represents an unpardonable sin; for Kierkegaard, sin is a struggle of despair. Donissan has doubts about the man, not about God (he remains, eventually, the saint of God), and he tends to be in the religious sphere, with the singularized self in relation to an intensified and self-conscious despair:

³⁶ G. Bernanos, *Under the Sun of Satan*, p. 186.

... if Donissan had not despaired and participated in the fallenness of the world, symbolized by Mouchette, he never would have been called to sanctity. The cry of despair and the absence of hope are, for Bernanos as for Kierkegaard, prior to the appearance of the saint, who must pass through this dark night of the soul before emerging into salvation.³⁷

Another challenging aspect concerning a Kierkegaardian reading of Donissan's despair is represented by the following bidirectional relation: the priest has not only the conception of God, but he is concomitantly before the devil, he literally walks along him. Divine salvation and consciousness about suffering go hand in hand with the demonic in this context, defined as a despair over sin, *i.e.* a continuation of the sin. By despairing over sin (despairing of the forgiveness of sins and declaring the untruth of Christianity), the priest is attempting to survive by sinking even deeper into it. For the priest, the demonic has the same quality as the divine –it is meaningful that the devil offered him the ability to read souls– and he enters into an absolute relation to it. Kierkegaard's solution, a transparency in God, is only possible through despair, *precisely by having despaired*.³⁸ But God as a divinity in agony in modern times, as the power of divine light, has been gravely affected by the devil; the murmur of the silver light together with the moments of emptying silence in Bernanos's novel are marked by a tragedy of darkness, nostalgia, and mourning, by feelings of an anticipated apocalypse. "This is present already in the title: it is the *sun* –the source of all light– that belongs to Satan. His is not the kingdom of darkness, but the kingdom of light and the kingdom of knowledge."³⁹ Considering that the sun is not shining anymore, the Kierkegaardian self, which needs water and sun in preparation for a fertile soil, is entirely exposed to despair. The blackness of the sun, a very popularized image in the French Catholic milieu during the 19th and 20th century, has its roots in English and French Romanticism, in the poems of Heinrich Heine, of William Blake or in Gérard de Nerval's essay from 1846 "Un lever de Soleil" (a chapter from his book *Voyage en Orient*), where it is associated with the desperate melancholia and with light as an image of death. In her book *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Julia Kristeva starts from the Freudian psychoanalysis and emphasizes a narcissistic melancholy in which the melancholic mourns not the object

³⁷ James Chappel, "The Poetics of Sainthood in Interwar Catholic Literature...", p. 1248.

³⁸ S. Kierkegaard, *SUD*, p. 144.

³⁹ James Chappel, "The Poetics of Sainthood in Interwar Catholic Literature...", p. 1250.

but the *Thing* (Germ. *Das Ding*, Fr. *la Chose*), which is an undetermined lost love object, all in all an archaic object or a pre-object; in this context, the language of the mourner is disintegrated, repetitive and monotonous, and indicates the abandon of the world itself, the dark emptiness of melancholia or of the sickness unto death. The final question remains thus if Father Donnisan is nothing else but a saint or that he is a potential saint, a modern one; in *Under the Sun of Satan*, Father Demange speaks about the *Christian of good* who maintains himself in the light above. He also adds that our saints (the Catholic ones) are powerful and good-natured giants, whose supernatural strength develops harmoniously, after a rhythm which our ignorance cannot perceive. There is always an osmosis in Bernanos between the destinies of grace and the destinies without God, between two communities, that of saints and that of sinners, and therefore a community of saints with sinners and, consequently, a community of sinners with saints, both pointing to the mystery of Christianity: the participation of Christ in the damnation of people, a Christ which opened his heart to this everlasting fire. A fire of exoneration in Kierkegaard's *Upbuilding Discourses*, a light of Christian faith and a *Father of lights*,⁴⁰ with whom there is no change or shadow of variation, turning the believer's thoughts and eyes towards heaven and salvation (although impure or contaminated) –the light as Love⁴¹ in the writings of *illumination* in both Kierkegaard and Bernanos:

If words still retained their original meanings, I could say that Creation is a drama of Love. Moralists like to regard sanctity as a luxury. Actually, it is a necessity. As long as Charity hadn't grown cold in the world, as long as the world had its share of saints, certain truths could be forgotten. Now, they are reappearing again, like a rock at low tide. It is sanctity and the saints who maintain the interior life without which humanity must debase itself to the point of extinction. It is in his own interior life, in fact, that man may find the necessary resources to escape barbarism or a danger worse still, the bestial servitude of the totalitarian ant hill. Of course, one may believe that this isn't the era of the saints, that the era of the saints has passed. But as I once wrote, it is always the era of the saints.⁴²

⁴⁰ S. Kierkegaard, "Every Good and Every Perfect Gift Is From Above", *Two Upbuilding Discourses* (1843) in *EUD*, pp. 33-34.

⁴¹ S. Kierkegaard, "Love Will Hide a Multitude of Sins", *Three Upbuilding Discourses* (1843) in *EUD*, p 55.

⁴² G. Bernanos, "Our Friends the Saints" in *The Last Essays of Georges Bernanos*, pp. 242-243.

III. An All-Embracing Grace

It is in the *Diary of a Country Priest* that “the world of sin confronts the world of grace like the reflected picture of a landscape in the blackness of very still, deep waters”;⁴³ the sinners embrace and intermingle with the saints in a perpetual and divine love, in a “sea of living”, all companions for eternity. But, before this moment of eternal love, the real image of the sin was the hatred of oneself which emerged into the hatred of others. Another saint, the unnamed young and poor priest of Ambricourt,⁴⁴ naked and defenseless before God, lives day after day the repetitive drama of fall and redemption in a boring despair; he is hostile against himself, and he also suffers a tragic misrelation with God. Bernanos writes thus about a *new* type of despair –findable also in *The Sickness unto Death* under the name of “the most appalling danger”⁴⁵–, which invades the daily life like a contagion or a leprosy of boredom (Fr. *ennui*): “an aborted despair, a shameful form of despair in some way like the fermentation of a Christianity in decay.”⁴⁶ Dealing with the loss of the selves of the parishioners, the priest of Ambricourt decides in his comforting thoughts to suffer for the souls of the others, meaning to suffer *on behalf of* the others. This priest has lost his angel, he feels the Word of God as a red-hot iron, picked up with both hands, and has the vision of the earth as a thin skin of milk over an ocean of a liquid fire –“How far down would one need to dig to rediscover the blue depths? ...”⁴⁷ Although the priest is conscious about the Kierkegaardian certainty that one never prays alone, the sense of solitude is overwhelming and it underlines the alienation of the self: like the obscure silence, solitude enters into the body through the unimaginable gap in the soul. The night of the body represents an experience that cannot be shared with anyone: “No

⁴³ G. Bernanos, *Diary of a Country Priest*, pp. 138-139.

⁴⁴ This is the description of the boring and repetitious parish: “Mine is A PARISH like all the rest. They’re all alike. Those of today I mean (...) My parish is bored stiff; no other word for it. Like so many others! We can see them being eaten up by boredom, and we can’t do anything about it. Someday perhaps we shall catch it ourselves –become aware of the cancerous growth within us. You can keep going a long time with that in you.” Ibid., p. 1. In Bresson’s film from 1951, the priest appears with a stony expression, solemn, emotionless, coldly but with his eyes in tears, following the aesthetics of French New Wave which emerged precisely in 1950s. The film accurately presents the encapsulated drama of faith, fear of dying and anxiety of the clerical hero.

⁴⁵ *SUD*, p. 9.

⁴⁶ *Diary of a Country Priest*, p. 3.

⁴⁷ See this exquisite analogy in *Diary of a Country Priest*, p. 75.

one ever discovers the depths of his own loneliness.”⁴⁸ In these moments of primordial silence – a silence that is keeping the selves and not the other way round – the priest has always one witness to face, God, and he makes the prove of a real faith⁴⁹ apart from worldly impurity. But God had launched him in despair as a newborn blind animal into the water: therefore, he feels an unbearable sadness, he assumes it in his soul, heart, and bones, and maybe this sadness represents the sign that God will speak to him. The priest believes that this old sadness did not enter into his soul, it was within him from the beginning: “... these [despair, sadness, anxiety] are only states of the Spirit, are the Spirit itself. I believe that ever since his fall, man’s condition is such that neither around him nor within him can he perceive anything, except in the form of agony.”⁵⁰ Anxiety as the fundamental organ of sense in the body or as the most unexplainable sickness of the spirit prepares the subject for tomorrow, the day he would die – again in accordance with Kierkegaard for whom anxiety is the instrument by which the individual appropriates sorrow and assimilates it in his heart in a continuously becoming movement. On the other hand, there is a sort of metamorphosis in the voice of God which, although blessed and quiet, can be heard only by those who are punished and purified in poverty: the priest drinks and eats nothing else but wine and bread. Between death and dying, being the prisoner of a sacred and actual agony, the priest of Ambricourt chooses with resignation a moderate and blind death; the diary represents, in fact, his goodbye letter to a world full of misery, a never-ending struggle with the sacerdotal self – one that is divided into thousands of meaningful and fragile letters – or a desire of auto-annihilation in a strange or unexpected form of the *sin against hope*:

The sin against hope – the deadliest sin and perhaps also the most cherished, the most indulged. It takes a long time to become aware of it, and the sadness which precedes and heralds its advent is so delicious! The richest of all the devil’s elixirs, his ambrosia...⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 223.

⁴⁹ “No, I have not lost my faith. (...) ... my faith is still whole, for I can feel it. I cannot reach it now; I can find it neither in my poor mind, unable to link two ideas correctly, working only on half delirious images, nor in my sensibility, nor yet in my conscience. Sometimes I feel that my faith has withdrawn and still persists where certainly I should never have thought of seeking it, in my flesh, my wretched flesh, in my flesh and blood, my perishable flesh which yet was baptized. Let me try and put it as plainly, as innocently as possible. I have not lost faith because God has graciously kept me from impurity.” Ibid., p.122-123.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 199.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 110.

Writing in his mortuary daily notebook that every man should die little by little in order to get used to the idea of eternity, the young priest faces what Anti-Climacus designates through the sickness unto death as the inability to die. I have already mentioned the *aborted despair* that is eating the parish like a cancer; accordingly, the young priest is aware, from the first page of the diary, of his own death caused by a devastating stomach disease. The athlete of God (Fr. “l’athlète de Dieu”⁵²) thought he would die because of tuberculosis, but he was overly impressed by the fact that he will die of an illness exceedingly rare in persons of his age. In his article about the transparency of grace in Bernanos, Allan White observes that the priest “advances into his own death as he pours himself out in an abandon of love for his parish; a community which does not understand him, fails to take him entirely seriously, and which, while dimly conscious of his spiritual gifts, in the end rejects him.”⁵³ His small parish is a sort of sacramental representation of the religious life of France: the spiritual death of each parishioner –a despair upon land and fortune–, of each small parish, evolves into the spiritual destruction of the entire country. Every Christian should participate to the grace of God and, thus, the mystery of Christ’s human face is actualized in the response of the individual to the divine grace. Again, the significant dialogue and correspondence is between the Kierkegaardian apostle (as priest, vicar, bishop) and the priesthood of Christ:

Christ is the model and ‘organ’ of the Christian priesthood, which he directly instituted in his act of dying to pour out his spirit and to give his body to his Church. (...) The priest is the supreme servant of the priesthood of Jesus Christ, a co-operator in the work of salvation who, in turn, awakens the spirit of priesthood in the members of Christ’s body the Church. (...) The priest is the one who continues the life of Jesus Christ as head of the Church. This headship is expressed in service, and this service springs from the renunciation of self which leads to the transparency in grace of the individual priest so that people may see only Jesus.⁵⁴

An essential theme in Bernanos is the coincidence between the kingdom for the dead ones and the kingdom for the living: there is no separation seeing that there is only God’s kingdom, omnipotent and almighty. Going back to the distinction between death and dying, the priest of Ambricourt

⁵² Paul Claudel in a letter to Bernanos from June 25, 1926 (*Correspondance*, Plon).

⁵³ Allan White, “The Transparency of Grace: Bernanos and the Priesthood”, *New Blackfriars*, Nov. 1998, Vol. 79, no. 933, p. 467.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 471.

acknowledges in a Kierkegaardian practice that only *that* individual is saved from despair who is *eternally* saved from despair, so his major preoccupation is to keep his fragile idealism connected to the possibility of the grace of God. For Anti-Climacus, to be sick of this exceptional sickness unto death does not mean death, but something much worse, the most terrifying danger –it is the sickness of the self of a despairing person who is *mortally ill* (the young priest), having an incurable illness (cancer) at a vital organ (stomach). To experience dying implies a one-sided movement or process towards a single result: as long as the priest is, death does not exist and as soon as death is, he no longer exists.⁵⁵ If despair denotes a form of suffering, death designates the conclusion or the interruption of consciousness, *i.e.*, of the consciousness of dying. Although death is detached from life, dying invokes a co-presence in life, a vicinity of profound reflection, a conscious pathology and a decisive moment of subjectivity. As every Kierkegaard reader knows, the intensity of despair is directly proportional to the degree of consciousness:

Death is not the end of the sickness, but death is incessantly the end. To be saved from this sickness by death is an impossibility, because the sickness and its torment –and the death– are precisely this inability to die.⁵⁶

The young priest is characterized by the absence of the ultimate hope, his *hopelessness* points to the fact that he is unable to die. Moreover, in his unconceivable sufferance felt as an act of extreme love, he is in a vague and doubtful state: dying and not dying, *dying the death* perpetually, being in an endlessly agony. Dying to the world guarantees a negation or an evaporation *before God* and, consequently, a transparency of the self in the (negative theology of a) *horrendum* of eternity: “To exist before God may seem unendurable to a man because he cannot come back to himself, become himself.”⁵⁷ The priest of Ambricourt was always in front of God’s eyes or in His Face (the Lutheran concept *Coram*⁵⁸ *Deo*, in the presence of God, face to face with God, in opposition to *Coram Hominibus*, in front of humanity), although he didn’t know it because God’s presence is invisible and creates *fear*

⁵⁵ Kierkegaard in an Epicurean reflection in *At a Graveside*: “when it is, I am not, and when I am, it is not.” *TDIO (Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions)*, ed. and trans., by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 73).

⁵⁶ *SUD*, p. 21.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁵⁸ Lat. *cora, corae* = the pupil of the eye.

and trembling: “I am afraid, and not be ashamed of it. As soon as Our Lord appears before me, may His eyes set me at Rest...”⁵⁹ Kierkegaard considers that the hour of death cannot be opposed, it can only be suffered and, most important, if death is experienced for one moment, it is experienced forever. In this sense, the despair of the priest is a *self-consuming* condition, under the law of *intensification*,⁶⁰ or, in other words, his despair is the despair of the *undead* or of the *living dead*,⁶¹ but a living death not in opposition with life. All in all, if he were to choose between death itself and the mortal malady, he would definitely choose death. As I have showed earlier, in his attempt of self-dying to worldliness and hoping to embrace the divine grace, the young priest –almost dead, but not buried yet– overcomes the sickness unto death, which represented, from the very beginning, a form of casting aside the self: “I was able at such time even to forget the very name of God. I was alone, utterly alone, facing my death –and that death was a wiping out, and nothing more.”⁶² To face one’s own death certifies one’s opportunity to live the end of a life-narrative; to put it differently, the step from life to death reconfirms the *infinite qualitative difference* between God and the concept of God. The question is if his rendezvous with God takes place after his dying to the self –a moment of purification or a godly appropriation– or before the spiritual defeat of despair –a preparation for a legitimate relationship with God, the unique power that created the self. The priest writes in his diary being profoundly affected by the continuous awareness of a separation from God: “I was not weeping over myself, I swear. I was never so near to hating myself. I was not weeping over my death...” and a few pages forward: “My death is here. A death like any other, and I shall enter into it with the feelings of a very commonplace, very ordinary man. It is even certain that I shall be no better at dying than I am at controlling my life. I shall be just as clumsy and awkward.”⁶³ In his clerical practice, the young country priest was always a witness and a pathfinder in the departing of the others, in the *kirkegård* of his miserable parish, but when “all is over”⁶⁴ the judgment of the personal life is imposed since death possesses, according to Kierkegaard, a retroactive

⁵⁹ *SUD*, p. 294.

⁶⁰ *SUD*, p. 18.

⁶¹ According to the description of George Connell in his book chapter “Knights and Knaves of the Living Dead: Kierkegaard’s Use of Living Death as a Metaphor for Despair” in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. by Patrick Stokes and Adam Buben, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2011, pp. 21-43.

⁶² *Diary of a Country Priest*, p. 275.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 275 & 279.

⁶⁴ The first sentence in *At a Graveside*: “Then all is over!” *TDIO*, p. 71.

power: his own death is no doubt “like any other” but nevertheless it is exceptional considering that his next thought is that maybe God wishes his death as some form of example to others. “From the Christian perspective, however, all is not over with death and burial.”⁶⁵ What is important here is that the priest finally entrusts himself to the opportunity of death and to the absolute relation to God.

As a conclusion, it is interesting to note that the inexplicable joy⁶⁶ of an eschatological promise is felt precisely like a grace: to see God means to die, to put an end to life, but it also means the starting point for an everlasting wisdom in its aspect of sanctified oblivion. Thus, the Christian hero, after a severe and Kierkegaardian *autopsy of faith*⁶⁷ in the last pages of the novel –through which the whole pain vanished and the self is able to know itself–, dies not only because of seeing God, but also because of seeing his own self, a self which is nothingness compared to the omnipotence of God, an infinite goodness. The act of writing in the diary in the twilight of life reveals the (Lutheran) signs of a longing for death, *of a theophany of death to self, of forgiveness and acceptance*.⁶⁸ And it also reaffirms the immortality of the soul which embraces God over the shadow of the future death:

Well, it's all over now. The strange mistrust I had of myself, of my own being, has flown, I believe forever. That conflict is done. I cannot understand it anymore. I am reconciled to myself, to the poor, poor shell of me. How easy it is to hate oneself! True grace is to forget. Yet if pride could die in us, the supreme grace would be to love oneself in all simplicity –as one would love any one of those who themselves have suffered and loved in Christ. (...) Does it matter? Grace is everywhere...⁶⁹

⁶⁵ David R. Law, “Learning to Face Death Earnestly: Kierkegaard’s Critique of Inauthentic Conceptions of Death in ‘At a Graveside’” in *International Journal on Humanistic Ideology*, vol. XI, no. 1, 2021, p. 52.

⁶⁶ About this special kind of joy, Kierkegaard writes that “each discourse still drinks deeply enough to find the joy”. *Preface*, “Part Three. The Gospel of Sufferings. Christian Discourses” in *UDVS*, p. 215.

⁶⁷ Johannes Climacus, *PF (Philosophical Fragments)*, 1844.

⁶⁸ As shown by Simon D. Podmore in his chapter “To Die and Yet Not Die: Kierkegaard’s Theophany of Death” in *Kierkegaard and Death*, pp. 44-64: “This movement of faith in the face of despair evokes the true theophany of the self before God, a theophany of death to self, of forgiveness and acceptance, which finally delivers the self from the abyssal despair of the melancholy theophany of death. (...) Despite the inherent primal fear of ontological extinction, despite the fact that one *imagines* that one will sink into nothingness before God, one is decisively *not* annihilated but reconciled through a gracious act of divine love, which makes room for the *life* of the self.”

⁶⁹ *Diary of a Country Priest*, p. 296 & 298.

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Filmography

Sous le soleil de Satan, 1987, directed by Maurice Pialat, screenplay by Sylvie Danton & Maurice Pialat, with Gérard Depardieu, Sandrine Bonnaire and Maurice Pialat, 93 minutes.

Journal d'un curé de campagne, 1951, directed by Robert Bresson, screenplay by Robert Bresson, with Claude Laydu, Jean Riveyre, André Guibert, 115 minutes.