

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the rhetorical function of a fantastic episode in Georges Bernanos' novel *Under Satan's Sun* (1926): a young priest's terrible combat against Satan in the shape of a horse dealer; God himself is also present, invisible, but definitely *there*. The popular fantastic genre may seem out of place in a novel belonging to the serious combat literature of the Catholic Revival, and the direct representation of the supernatural is also surprising because previous Catholic Revival novelists, such as Léon Bloy and Karl-Joris Huysmans, maintain a realistic, non-magical world and deal with God and Satan in the form of discourse as theological concepts and spiritual phenomena which can be talked or thought about by narrators or characters, but which are never represented directly. This paper demonstrates that in spite of these departures from the conventions of the genre, the fantastic Satan episode in *Under Satan's Sun* is neither a break with the seriousness nor with the realism of the Catholic novel. On the basis of Tvetan Todorov's definition of the traditional fantastic tale, the analysis shows that only the beginning of the fantastic episode follows Todorov's definition and that Bernanos invents a new fantastic mode which is simultaneously Christian and realistic. I argue that Bernanos' fantastic mode is a rhetorical strategy addressed to modern readers. In the secular world of the 1920s the novelist can no longer presuppose reader responsiveness to theological language and the aesthetic of the fantastic is more suitable for the purpose of persuading modern readers to accept the religious theme than the dogmatic language of the traditional Catholic novel.

INTRODUCTION

Georges Bernanos' first novel *Under Satan's Sun* (*Sous le soleil de Satan*) from 1926 contains a twenty-page fantastic episode: on his way to a neighbouring village a young priest, Donissan, meets a local horse dealer. As night falls, his nocturnal fellow traveller reveals himself to be Satan, and in the subsequent terrible combat against the Devil, God himself is also present, invisible, but definitely *there*. This fantastic episode is surprising, first because the popular genre of the fantastic may seem strangely out of place in a novel by Bernanos, whose serious works, extensively drawing on Catholic theology, belong to the combat literature of the Catholic Revival movement in France.¹ Secondly, it is important to underline the novelty of this direct representation of the supernatural in the Catholic novel which, as a genre, is deeply rooted in realism. The first novelists of the Catholic Revival, such as Karl-Joris Huysmans and Léon Bloy, as well as interwar Catholic novelists like François Mauriac and Graham Greene,

1. The Catholic Revival emerged in the 1880s as a literary movement against the growing secularisation of republic France. For further reading, see Richard Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution: The Catholic Revival in French Literature 1870-1914* (London: Constable, 1966).

shun the incarnation in concrete space and time of God or Satan. Maintaining a realistic, non-magical world, Catholic fiction dealt with God and Satan in the form of discourse as abstract, theological concepts and spiritual phenomena which can be talked or thought about by narrators or characters, but never be represented directly. Divine intervention in the universe of these novels is indirectly represented as signs, interpreted as such by the Church.

The goal of this paper is to show that in spite of the above-mentioned departures from the conventions of the genre, the fantastic Satan episode in *Under Satan's Sun* is neither a break with the seriousness nor with the realism of the Catholic novel because Bernanos uses the traditional fantastic tale in quite unprecedented ways. In *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Tzvetan Todorov defines the traditional fantastic tale of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the following way. The beginning of the tale baffles the readers by playing on their hesitation between two options in that, “the text obliges the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of real people and to hesitate between a natural explanation and a supernatural explanation of the described events”.² Todorov categorises the natural, rational explanation, such as illusions, dreams, or madness, as *the strange*, while the supernatural explanation, i.e. events taking place in a magic world, is classified as *the marvellous*. At the end of the fantastic narrative the reader’s hesitation comes to an end when the narrator either chooses the rational explanation (the fantastic-strange) typical of the gothic tale, or the supernatural explanation (the fantastic-marvellous) typical of the fairytale.³

My analysis shows that the beginning of the Satan episode follows Todorov’s definition, as it plays on the reader’s hesitation between the strange and the marvellous. But concerning the choice of final explanation I show that Bernanos chooses neither of the two Todorovian explanations, which indeed are incompatible with the genre of the Catholic novel. The fantastic-strange explanation does not fit because it denies the existence of the supernatural while the fantastic-marvellous one does not apply because a magic fairytale universe breaks with the realism of the Catholic novel. Instead Bernanos invents a new category of the fantastic which is a synthesis of the strange and the supernatural. This new fantastic mode is simultaneously Christian and realistic, as it maintains the existence of the supernatural and locates the supernatural forces within the

2. “Le texte oblige le lecteur à considérer le monde des personnages comme un monde de personnes vivantes et à hésiter entre une explication naturelle et une explication surnaturelle des événements évoqués” (Todorov 1970, 37, my translation).

3. See chapter 3, “L’étrange et le merveilleux” (Todorov 1970, 46-62).

human mind.

What is the point of writing in the fantastic mode in a solemn Catholic novel? In the secular world of the 1920s the Catholic novelist can no longer presuppose reader responsiveness to abstract theological language, and I argue that Bernanos' choice of the fantastic mode is a rhetorical strategy⁴ addressed to modern readers. The fantastic is an important contribution to the aesthetics of the Catholic combat novel because it is more suitable for the purpose of persuading modern readers to accept the religious theme than the dogmatic language of the traditional Catholic novel.

THE NARRATIVE MODE: REALISM AND POETIC LICENSE

The type of narrator is of vital importance to the rhetoric of *Under Satan's Sun*. The novel is basically realistic, as the author establishes a realistic framework by choosing a third-person narrator who believes in the authenticity of the narrated events and whose narrative about the encounter with Satan is based on Donissan's subsequent testimony in the form of written accounts and conversations with other clergymen. The narrator refers frequently to this testimony in order to produce documentary evidence of the events. But the documents are unusually clumsy and incomplete because Donissan is a slow and heavy rustic unable to express himself. The narrator realises that throughout his entire life the priest had never been capable of clearly describing what happened that night on the road (Bernanos 2001, 131). Consequently, the narrator takes on the task of filling in the gaps of these fragmentary documents and interpreting the events for readers. As such, the narrator, adamantly described as a *poet and interpreter* on the first page, has neither omniscience nor solid documentary knowledge, but only partial knowledge about the events. The reader encounters him while he is composing the narrative, the story springing from his mind as he stands by a window:

It was the time when the poet distilled his inner life, making it yield its fragrant and poisoned secret essence. Already the human herd, with its myriad arms and mouths, would be moving in the shadows, and the boulevard coming alive with light and people, while he, his elbows on a marble-topped table, would be watching the night rise before him like a lily. It was also the time of evening when the story of Germaine Malorthy (...) began. (Bernanos 2001, 1)⁵

4. Wayne C. Booth, who treats narrative technique as rhetoric, writes, "My subject is the technique of non-didactic fiction, viewed as the art of communicating with readers – the rhetorical resources available to the writer of epic, novel, or short story as he tries, consciously or unconsciously, to impose his fictional world upon the reader." (Booth 1961, xiii)

5. "Voici l'heure du poète qui distillait la vie dans son coeur, pour en extraire l'essence secrète, embaumée, empoisonnée. Déjà la troupe humaine remue dans l'ombre, aux mille bras, aux mille bouches; déjà le boulevard déferle et resplendit Et lui, accoudé à la table de marbre, regardait

The translation “the poet distilled his inner life” is not an exact translation of the original French text (see note), which would be better translated as “the poet distilled life in his heart”. This means that he has been given poetic licence to fill in the gaps in the course of events, to use his own imagination, to interpret the episode and to choose aesthetic forms and modes suitable for the purpose of arousing the readers’ feelings. As we shall see the narrator-poet, although admittedly not omniscient, has full access to the priest’s conscience, including extensive use of psycho-narration,⁶ and he chooses to unfold the events as an elaborate fantastic tale. As fantastic literature was well known to contemporary readers as an aesthetic game with the supernatural in which religious feelings could be played with without serious commitment, the fantastic mode appealed to a much larger audience than the narrow circle of readers of Catholic literature. The following analysis shows that Donissan’s fantastic wanderings before his encounter with the Devil function as a playful and gradual familiarisation with the supernatural, which prepares the reader for his subsequent introduction into the supernatural, Christian universe.

THE FANTASTIC WANDERINGS

The encounter with the Devil takes place in Part I, chapter III. The chapter begins with a detailed, realistic description of Donissan striding along in November through rainy, deserted fields on his way to the neighbouring village of Etaples, where he has been asked to hear confession the next morning (Bernanos 2001, 99). Night falls and the tired priest takes a *rest* at a crossroads, sinking into religious meditation. When he stands up to continue his walk, the first *fantastic* elements appear (Bernanos 2001, 107). When he notices the extraordinary, dense silence around him he is seized with some anxiety and when he begins to walk he notices that the road is now perfectly smooth and springy. Overcoming his anxiety he feels remarkably light and free, and to his astonishment the religious texts which are normally so difficult for him to understand and to remember now present themselves to him in perfect order, even with his own handwritten notes in the margins. He decides to leave the main road to take a *shortcut* and is surprised to see that the normally muddy path pitted with ruts is now firm and smooth. He also wonders about the absence of recognisable objects, for example the road mender’s hut normally visible where the path slopes down to a meadow and about the fact that he can

monter la nuit, comme un lis. Voici l’heure où commence l’histoire de Germaine Malorthy” (Bernanos 1961, 59). Germaine Malorthy and Donissan are the main characters of the novel.

6. Dorrit Cohn’s term for omniscient narrators’ rendering and interpretation of the mental stuff which characters are themselves unable to formulate (Cohn 1978, 37-74).

suddenly clearly see some houses in the pitch-darkness. Looking up he sees the road he left a while ago and realises he has *returned to his starting point*.

At this point both the priest and the reader can rationally explain the strange walking around in circles as caused by exhaustion and the impenetrable darkness (Still, why is the priest so keen-sighted in the dark? Why is the road springy and smooth?). Over the course of the next couple of pages the *fantastic hesitation* increases and Donissan's wonder turns into fear and in the end utter horror (Bernanos 2001, 108-111). At a first reading, the wanderings appear to be an impenetrable chaos, but a close reading reveals a clear and constant structure. The circular walk is repeated three times, and each one consisting of exactly the same elements: a walk along the road; a rest during which the exhausted priest meditates or dreams; a shortcut leading him astray; and a return to the starting point. The repetitions, the number three and the circular movements are magic features pointing towards a *supernatural* interpretation. On the other hand the whole sequence can also be interpreted *rationally* as something going on in the priest's imagination or dreams or as hallucinations during his periods of rest. This interpretation is encouraged by the fact that the priest's periods of rest create a *mise en abyme* effect of descent by degrees into the depths of the conscience. The first period of rest is a meditation on his religious crises, a self-hatred and a hatred of life caused by exaggerated mortifications, a moral suicide of satanic nature (Bernanos 2001, 102). In the second sequence he dreams "a lucid nightmare" in which he fears seeing "an object" that represents his fear (Bernanos 2001, 109), while in the last sequence he becomes unconscious. When he opens his eyes he has a hallucination in which, "he knew that the presence was with him once more" (Bernanos 2001, 111).

THE HORSE DEALER: A FANTASTIC FIGURE

After the third circular walk Donissan gives up and turns back, his last walk homewards comprising the same structure as the first three (walk, shortcut, resting period, magic circle). The events can still be read in the double perspective of the fantastic hesitation – as another mental projection of the satanic presence in the priest's conscience or as the eruption of supernatural events in the external reality of the novel. On his way home, the priest realises that he is no longer alone:

For some time now in fact – why not admit it? – *he had not been alone*. Someone was walking beside him. It looked like a very lively short man, first on his right, then on his left, sometimes in front of him and sometimes behind, hard to make out in the dark,

trotting along at first without a word. Perhaps they could help each other on such a dark night? Did people need to know each other to make the journey through the depths of the silent night together? “What they mean by the dead of night, eh?” the little man said suddenly. (Bernanos 2001, 111)⁷

In the beginning the horse dealer is marked by *fantastic ambiguity*. He is a jolly fellow chatting away about the local people. But he is *too* jolly, buffoonish even. His quick movements are exaggerated, his apparent omnipresence is disquieting, and his ability to connect with the priest’s thoughts and repeat them as in the quotation above is decidedly alarming, *not natural*. On the other hand the buffoonishness, the swiftness and the mindreading also remind us of the figure of the double in Dostoyevsky’s *The Double*. Like Dostoyevsky’s double the horse dealer can be interpreted *rationally* as a mental projection of a disturbed mind.

Soon the horse dealer proposes a *shortcut* (Bernanos 2001, 112). The priest is overwhelmingly grateful towards the friendly horse dealer who helps him over ditches and prevents him from cutting himself on barbed wire and from falling down a slope. He is gripped with a strong desire to confide his troubles to his friend and is therefore in despair when the horse dealer suddenly seems dismissive of him. Just as Donissan bursts into impotent tears the horse dealer proposes a *rest* on top of a slope (Bernanos 2001, 114). Encouraged by the horse dealer’s comforting, sympathetic words, the grateful, exhausted priest now confides to him that he feels abandoned by God. Leaning on his friend’s shoulder the priest suffers three horrible fits of vertigo. As the narrator has just defined the priest’s state of mind as “increasing madness” (Bernanos 2001, 114) the reader may explain the vertigo *rationally* as fits of madness whirling the priest into the deepest abyss of his conscience:

A supple yet ever tighter and more unyielding band of dizziness encircled his head, and he fainted with his eyes still wide open, speaking as if in a dream. (...) He seemed to be slipping obliquely and gently into a silence. Then suddenly the duration of his fall frightened him. He gauged its depth (...). (His companion’s) voice was still friendly, but seemed to be booming. “It’s only a bit of vertigo ... (...) Lean on me. Don’t be afraid. Oh, you’ve had a hell of a walk, you’re exhausted. I’ve been following you and watching you, my friend” (...) He was slipping again, falling vertically faster and faster into darkness, with a roaring like the sound of deep waters in his ears. (...) In an instant,

7. “Car depuis un moment (pourquoi ne l’avouerait-il point?) *il n’est plus seul*. Quelqu’un marche à ses côtés. C’est sans doute un petit homme, fort vif, tantôt à droite, tantôt à gauche, devant, derrière, mais dont il distingue mal la silhouette – et qui trotte d’abord sans souffler mot. Par une nuit si noire, ne pourrait-on s’entraider? A-t-on besoin de se connaître pour aller de compagnie, à travers ce grand silence, cette grande nuit? ‘Une grande nuit, hein? dit tout à coup le petit homme.’” (Bernanos 1961, 167)

for an almost imperceptible fragment of a second, all thought left him, and he was aware only of what was supporting him, the density and fixity of the obstacle holding him back from an imaginary abyss. (...) A mysterious fire seemed to be melting the dizziness inside him, which was flowing slowly away from his veins. (Bernanos 2001, 115-116)⁸

THE END OF THE FANTASTIC HESITATION

But the vertigo also turns out to be a whirling into the *abyss of Hell*, for at this moment the fantastic hesitation concerning the identity of the horse dealer is brought to an end. The horror-stricken priest understands in whose arms he is sitting when the horse dealer declares himself to be *Lucifer* in the mocking, sneering language of the Devil:

Hold on tight, you stupid little creature, my little priest, my little comrade. Rest now. I've really looked for you, hunted you out. Ah, how you love me! (...) We'll be friends forever now!" (...) when, in a mad act of sacrilege, the unclean mouth was pressed against his own (...) so extreme was his terror that his very life was suspended (...). "That's a friend's kiss", the horse dealer said tranquilly, wiping his lips on the back of his hands. "I've filled you with myself now, you stupid little tabernacle of Jesus Christ. (...) I kiss you all (...). You carry me around in your murky flesh, me, the bringer of light, in the depths of your guts, me, Lucifer! (...) (Bernanos 2001, 117-118)⁹

The effect of the initial fantastic hesitation has been to introduce the supernatural to the readers as a literary game which gradually activates their religious feelings so that they are now more ready to leap into the novel's unambiguously religious universe and accept the *narrator's final choice of the supernatural explanation*. At this point the narrator confirms that the horse dealer *is* Lucifer – an existing, supernatural power, and

8. "Le vertige ceignait sa tête d'une couronne souple, et pourtant, resserrée peu à peu, inflexible. Puis il défailloit, les yeux grands ouverts, parlant en rêve... (...) Il lui sembla qu'il glissait dans le silence, d'une chute oblique, très douce. Puis, tout à coup, la durée même de ce glissement l'effraya; il en mesura la profondeur. (...) La voix, toujours amicale, mais qui sonna terriblement à ses oreilles, disait: 'Ce n'est qu'un étourdissement... (...) Appuyez-vous sur moi : ne craignez rien! Ah! Vous avez rudement marché! Que vous êtes las! Il y a longtemps que je vous suis, que je vous vois faire, l'ami!' (...) Le glissement reprit d'une chute sans cesse accélérée, perpendiculaire. Les ténèbres où il s'enfonçait sifflaient à ses oreilles comme une eau profonde. (...) En une seconde, pour une fraction presque imperceptible de temps, toute pensée l'abandonna – seulement sensible à l'appui rencontré – à la densité, à la fixité de l'obstacle qui le retenait ainsi au-dessus d'un abîme imaginaire. (...) Son vertige, comme dissous au creux de sa poitrine par un feu mystérieux, s'écoulait lentement de ses veines". (Bernanos 1961, 172)

9. "'Tiens-moi ferme, bête stupide, petit prêtre, mon camarade. Repose-toi. Je t'ai bien cherché, bien chassé. Te voilà. Comme tu m'aimes! (...) vieux compagnon pour toujours!' (...) lorsque, par une dérision sacrilège, la bouche immonde pressa la sienne (...) la perfection de sa terreur fut telle que le mouvement même de la vie s'en trouva suspendu (...) 'Tu as reçu le baiser d'un ami, dit tranquillement le maquignon, en appuyant ses lèvres au revers de la main. Je t'ai rempli de moi, à mon tour, tabernacle de Jésus-Christ, cher nigaud! (...) Je vous baise tous (...). Vous me portez dans votre chair obscure, moi dont la lumière fut l'essence – dans le triple recès de vos tripes – moi, Lucifer...' (Bernanos 1961, 173-174)

not an illusion:

For the first time (Donissan) heard, saw and touched the being that was to be his shameful companion for the rest of his harsh life, and if we are to believe those who were either told of or actually witnessed a particular hidden ordeal, he was to hear that voice again and again until he was finally freed from it (Bernanos 2001, 117)¹⁰

However, the narrative construction of the supernatural dimension has nothing to do with Todorov's category of the fantastic-marvellous. Whereas Todorov distinguishes between the choice of *either* a rational interpretation explaining the events as mental processes (the fantastic-strange) *or* a supernatural interpretation explaining the events as supernatural manifestations occurring in the external world (the fantastic-marvellous), the narrator *combines* the mental level of the fantastic-strange and the external magic of the fantastic-marvellous in a *synthesis*. In the rest of the Satan episode Lucifer and the course of events are *both* supernatural *and* mental elements in Donissan's conscience. By incorporating the divine and the satanic forces in the priest's mind as his inner supernatural narrative, the novel maintains a realistic world, which is why Bernanos' version of the fantastic is in accordance with the genre of the Catholic novel, although it may appear not to be so at first hand.

THE COMBAT AGAINST SATAN

The combat against Satan is the novel's heart of darkness, where the main themes of evil, temptation, sin and damnation as opposed to goodness, free will, grace and salvation are unfolded in narrative form. As we read along, we understand that Satan is ultimately *God's messenger*. Lucifer is sent by God to test the priest's will to resist satanic temptation, and to present him with special grace giving him the ability to read the innermost soul of the penitent during confession under direct illumination of the divine voice. This grace is ambiguous, however. Used humbly and with charity, it produces repentance and salvation, but the supernatural insight of the grace also represents the satanic temptation of curiosity and pride, and used in this sinful state Satan's voice takes over and produces denial of God and leads to perdition.

The long battle of temptation before the final presentation of God's gift begins immediately after the horse dealer has declared himself to be Lucifer. The narrator gives

10. "C'était la première fois que (Donissan) entendait, voyait, touchait celui-là qui fut le très ignominieux associé de sa vie douloureuse, et, si nous en croyons quelques-uns qui furent les confidents ou les témoins d'une certaine épreuve secrète, que de fois devra-t-il l'entendre encore, jusqu'au définitif élargissement!" (Bernanos 1961, 173)

several hints to indicate that the events occur in the priest's consciousness, e.g. when the combat begins he is still sitting on top of the slope where he had his terrible fits of vertigo at the brink of the "imaginary abyss" of Hell; he remains sitting there during the entire fight; and when he is found by some local quarrymen later in the night he is still lying there on the ground in a state of deep sleep or unconsciousness. Finally, his appearance at the beginning of the combat is that of a man having an apoplectic fit, a hallucination or a nightmare, "The saint's face was as white and stiff as a corpse's. His mouth, twisted in a painful grimace like a terrible smile, his tightly closed eyes" (Bernanos 2001, 118).¹¹ Satan, sure of his victory, removes his arm to give the priest room to fall into the abyss, but the priest sits tight, an iron will keeping him from falling over. Satan, taken aback, touches the priest's forehead, eyes, mouth and hands simultaneously, but touching these parts of the priest's body chills him to the bones and he says, "I expect it's all your anointing, all that smearing yourself with holy oils, all that hocus-pocus" (Bernanos 2001, 119).¹² His power diminishes under the influence of the holy oil and the priest's unwavering will, and Donissan, "still humble in his triumph", feels his victory "more certain and complete with every passing moment" (Bernanos 2001, 119). Satan's discourse and manner become once more those of a common horse dealer:

His voice (...) returned to its usual tone and, with a certain simplicity, he spoke as follows: "Leave me. It's over. You are stronger than I thought. (...) For a minute now I've had no power over you". He pulled the large handkerchief from his pocket again and rubbed his hands and face frantically, his breath hissing painfully between his teeth. "Stop mumbling your prayers. (...) It's your will I haven't been able to break." (Bernanos 2001, 120)¹³

Donissan's prayers and stern will to resist evil produce *God's presence*. God is never visualised physically for the reader by the narrator and Donissan cannot see him either. But Satan can. At the end of the combat Satan says, "Oh, when I grasped you just now, you were in His thoughts, and even your guardian angel trembled in the swirling light ... and yet your dull human eyes could see nothing of what was happening" (Bernanos

11. "Le visage du saint de Lumbres avait la pâleur et la rigidité du cadavre. (...) sa bouche, relevée aux coins d'une grimace douloureuse qui ressemblait à un effrayant sourire, (...) ses yeux durement clos." (Bernanos 1961, 174)

12. "Ce sont les onctions, sans doute, votre sacré barbouillage d'huiles consacrées – des sorcelleries." (Bernanos 1961, 176)

13. "Sa voix (...) reprit son habituel accent, et il prononça les paroles suivantes, avec une certaine simplicité : ' Laisse-moi. (...) Je ne te savais pas si fort. (...) Depuis une minute, je n'ai plus aucun pouvoir sur toi. ' Il retira de sa poche le large mouchoir, et s'essuya frénétiquement le visage et les mains. La respiration faisait entre ses lèvres un sifflement douloureux." (Bernanos 1961, 176)

2001, 126-127).¹⁴ By this subtle choice of representing God through the Devil's internal focalisation¹⁵ the narrator avoids an embodiment of God which would no doubt be seen as too daring, even sacrilegious. On three occasions God intervenes in the combat as an invisible force present on the outskirts of the battlefield. His first intervention is implied by the horse dealer's sudden fear, "He looked right and left with increasing uneasiness and suddenly turned around and peered into the darkness behind him" (Bernanos 2001, 120).¹⁶

Although almost annihilated now, Satan manages to gather all his strength for another attack. In his eyes, Donissan sees a terrible vision of Hell and damnation and experiences an absolute vertigo:

The whole abyss of stellar space and the boiling spray of the ocean of nebulae coming into being, trillions of miles away, beyond the immeasurable void through which he is doomed to fall forever (...). His heart was beating against his ribs at twice its normal rate, then it stopped completely. (...) (H)is fingers (...) clawed the ground. (...) The intrepid priest, beaten down and, as it were, torn from the earth by the enormous pull of nothingness, saw himself eternally lost. Yet, even then his final thought was one of obscure defiance. (Bernanos 2001, 120-121)¹⁷

Because of Donissan's perseverance, the satanic eyes become once again just like ordinary eyes, and the defeated horse dealer announces his departure. He lingers on, though; after proclaiming that he has deliberately chosen God's hate instead of his love, he tries to show off his strength by challenging God with one of the Devil's usual tricks of mocking the liturgy of the Church, all the time "neighing with joy" – "(t)he laugh seemed to echo to the farthest horizon" (Bernanos 2001, 121). But the defiance ends rather pitifully and the horse dealer admits that it is just "a child's game, not even worth watching" (Bernanos 2001, 121). The Devil's pitiful weakness and God's hate of him arouse the priest's *compassion*. Gently, in an empathetic voice, he asks Satan to go away. Compassion grants him immediately God's grace in the form of an invisible force hurling Satan away, "The invisible obstacle the dark shape had suddenly thrown itself at was certainly no

14. "(Ah! quand je t'ai pressé tout à l'heure, sa pensée s'est fixée sur toi et ton ange lui-même tremblait dans la giration de l'éclair!) Cependant, tes yeux de boue n'ont rien vu." (Bernanos 1961, 183)

15. See Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Genette 1972, 206-211).

16. "Il regardait à droite et à gauche avec une inquiétude grandissante. Même il se retourna subitement, et scruta l'ombre, derrière lui." (Bernanos 1961, 177)

17. "Tout l'abîme sidéral, et bouillante à des trillions de lieues l'écume des nébuleuses en gestation, au travers du vide que rien ne mesure et que va traverser sa chute éternelle (...). Son coeur battit deux fois plus furieusement contre ses côtes, et s'arrêta. (...) Les doigts (...) grattèrent le sol comme des griffes. (...) L'homme intrépide, comme ployé et arraché de terre par l'énorme appel du néant, se vit cette fois perdu sans retour. Et pourtant, à cet instant même, sa suprême pensée fut encore un obscur défi." (Bernanos 1961, 177)

ordinary hindrance, since (...) the ground was shaken to its depths and groaned in the profound silence” (Bernanos 2001, 121-122).¹⁸ Donissan addresses his adversary in these words, “This strength certainly doesn’t come from me (...). It has been given to me to see you (...) insofar as that is possible for human eyes. I can see you crushed by your pain, right to the point of collapse and death, which will never be granted to you, you poor tortured being” (Bernanos 2001, 122).¹⁹ Donissan’s words of compassion crush Satan’s power completely:

At those final words the monster rolled from top to bottom of the slope and onto the road, where he writhed in the mud, twisting in horrible spasms. (...) Eventually his voice rose in a shrill, penetrating, pitiful scream, “Enough, enough, you consecrated dog, you torturer! Who told you that pity is what we dread more than anything else in the world, you anointed swine!” (Bernanos 2001, 122)²⁰

The priest is now at the peak of his power over the fiend, and the Devil’s powerlessness is visualised as physical degeneration and a diminishing figure. He loses the human shape of a horse dealer and over the next five pages (Bernanos 2001, 121-125) he is described as “horrible creature”, “dark shape”, “monster”, “corpse”, “thing”, “wretched husk” and “shuddering object”. When the creature’s strength has ebbed out and he is lying on the ground like a corpse, Donissan asks calmly what it wants with him. Now the monster reveals that it is God’s messenger, “We are allowed to tempt you from now until you die. (...) He sent me to you, to put you to the test” (Bernanos 2001, 123).²¹ Full of confidence that he can resist the temptation, the priest declares, “The strength you cannot break is coming to me from God” (Bernanos 2001, 123).²² At the very moment he pronounces these words the creature changes shape and transforms into Donissan’s double, who is the *temptation of curiosity*, as it is not only a perfect physical likeness of the priest, but also a complete vision of his inner world:

The shrewdest observation of our inner world can cope with only one aspect at a

18. L’obstacle invisible contre lequel le noir lutteur s’était tout à coup heurté n’était certes pas ordinaire, car (...) dans le grand silence (...) jusque dans ses profondeurs, le sol trembla et gémit.” (Bernanos 1961, 178)

19. “Cette force ne vient pas de moi (...) Il m’est donné de te voir (...). Autant que cela est possible au regard de l’homme, je te vois. Je te vois écrasé par ta douleur, jusqu’à la limite de l’anéantissement – qui ne te sera point accordé, ô créature suppliciée!” (Bernanos 1961, 178-179)

20. “A ce dernier mot, le monstre roula de haut en bas du talus sur la route, et se tordit dans la boue, tiré par d’horribles spasmes. (...) Et sa voix s’éleva enfin, perçante, aiguë, lamentable, ‘Assez! Assez! chien consacré, bourreau! Qui t’a appris que de tout au monde la pitié est ce que nous redoutons le plus, bête ointe! (...)’” (Bernanos 1961, 179)

21. “Il nous est permis de t’éprouver, dès ce jour et jusqu’à l’heure de ta mort. (...) Il m’a envoyé vers toi pour t’éprouver. ” (Bernanos 1961, 179)

22. “C’est de Dieu que je reçois à cette heure la force que tu ne peux briser.” (Bernanos 1961, 180)

time, and what the future saint of Lumbres was now discovering was the whole and the parts, his ideas, their origin and ramifications, the infinite network linking them, and the tiniest vibrations of his will, as if a body, laid bare, were displaying its life beating in the pattern of its arteries and veins. His vision, which was both single and multiple, like a man seeing a three-dimensional object, was so perfect that the poor priest saw himself not only in the present but also in the past and the future, saw in fact his whole life (Bernanos 2001, 123-124)²³

Donissan apparently surmounts the temptation of self-knowledge. “Get thee behind me, Satan!” he says (Bernanos 2001, 124), angrily seizing the monster’s shoulder to try and break it. The double vanishes, the priest kicks “the shuddering object” off the road and declares that he has no need for “special insights”. However, the narrator states in psycho-narration that this is not true, “[T]he regret for the lost vision was hurting every fiber of his being. The dizziness brought on by a supernatural curiosity, now and forever ineffectual, left him gasping and empty” (Bernanos 2001, 124).²⁴

To the sin of curiosity already marking him, Donissan now adds the *sin of pride*. He states triumphantly that he is not afraid of Satan and that Satan is now in his hands (Bernanos 2001, 125). Immediately the almost annihilated Satan begins to grow, “To his astonishment, just when he thought he was putting forth all his strength irresistibly, he saw the thing on the ground stir, swell, take on a human shape, and become once more the jovial companion he had recently been” (Bernanos 2001, 125).²⁵

The horse dealer declares that he is far less afraid of the priest and of his prayers than of God, stating, “He’s not far away ... I’ve sensed His presence for a moment now ... ah, ah, he’s a hard master!” (Bernanos 2001, 125).²⁶ He listens and his face lights up

23. “L’observation la plus sagace, tournée vers l’univers intérieur, n’en saisit qu’un aspect à la fois. Et ce que découvrait le futur saint de Lumbres, à ce moment, c’était l’ensemble et le détail, ses pensées, avec leurs racines, leurs prolongements, l’infini réseau qui les relie entre elles, les moindres vibrations de son vouloir, ainsi qu’un corps dénudé montrerait dans le dessin de ses artères et de ses veines le battement de la vie. Cette vision, à la fois une and multiple, telle que d’un homme qui saisirait du regard un objet dans ses trois dimensions, était d’une perfection telle que le pauvre prêtre se reconnut, non seulement dans le présent, mais dans le passé, dans l’avenir, qu’il reconnut toute sa vie” (Bernanos 1961, 180)

24. “Il parlait ainsi, bien que le regret de la vision perdue blessât toutes ses fibres. Le vertige d’une curiosité surnaturelle, désormais sans effet, à jamais, le laissait haletant, vide” (Bernanos 1961, 181)

25. “A sa grande surprise, et à l’instant même où il croyait donner toute sa force, irrésistiblement, il vit la dépouille s’agiter, s’enfler, reprendre une forme humaine, et ce fut le jovial compagnon de la première heure.” (Bernanos 1961, 182)

26. “Il n’est pas loin ... Je le flaire depuis un instant ... Ho! Ho! que ce maître est dur!” (Bernanos 1961, 182)

when he hears, “his enemy’s footsteps dying away” (Bernanos 2001, 125). God’s withdrawal is the result of the priest’s sinful pride, and it is this moment, when the priest is filled with sin and left by God, that Satan chooses to announce that he is the bringer of *God’s special grace*, “You’ve been given a grace today, but you’ve paid a high price for it. And you’ll pay a higher one yet” (Bernanos 2001, 125).²⁷ Donissan cannot resist asking what grace he means, and this outburst of sinful curiosity fully restores Satan’s power:

The cry of curiosity had fully restored the strange creature’s balance and set it on its feet again, for it slowly straightened itself up, sat down with affected calm, and carefully buttoned up its leather jacket. The Picardy horse dealer was sitting in the same place as before, as if he had never left it. (Bernanos 2001, 125-126)²⁸

Thus, it is a Satan in full power who finally reveals *the secret of God’s grace* to a powerless and sinful Donissan, namely that the vision of the inner self which he has just seen in his own double is a divine gift meant to use on other people during confession (Bernanos 2001, 126). This grace is given by God but received in a state of sin and is therefore *ambiguous*. The horse dealer, after having ridiculed the priest for some time under scornful laughter, outlines Donissan’s tragic life as an ambiguous saint with these parting words, “I’ve held you against my chest and cradled you in my arms! And how many more times you’ll pamper me, thinking you’re clasping Him to your heart. That’s your sign. That’s the seal of my hatred on you” (Bernanos 2001, 127).²⁹

Then Satan forces Donissan down onto his knees, and when the priest throws himself on him he vanishes. Later that night, the priest is found lying unconscious on the ground by some local quarrymen who manage to restore him to consciousness and set him on his feet. On his way home Donissan’s divine gift is put to the test for the first time when he meets the young, rebellious Mouchette. She has killed her secret lover in the prologue of the novel and wanders about the roads in agony, deeply marked by her crime, but in rebellion against God. Now Donissan becomes responsible for the salvation of Mouchette’s soul in a most strange scene of confession in the wood at dawn. He breaks through her defences, and guided by divine inspiration, he gains a crystal clear

27. “Aujourd’hui une grâce t’a été faite. Tu l’as payée cher. Tu la paieras plus cher!” (Bernanos 1961, 182)

28. “Comme si le cri de la curiosité (...) l’eût tout à fait rétabli dans son équilibre, remis d’aplomb, l’être étrange se dressa lentement, s’assit avec un calme affecté, boutonna posément sa veste de cuir. Le maquignon picard était à la même place, comme s’il ne l’eût jamais quittée.” (Bernanos 1961, 182)

29. “Je t’ai tenu sur ma poitrine; je t’ai bercé dans mes bras. Que de fois encore, tu me dorloteras, croyant presser *l’autre* sur ton coeur! Car tel est ton signe. Tel est sur toi le sceau de ma haine.” (Bernanos 1961, 184)

understanding of her sinful soul, which he communicates to Mouchette in a charitable voice emphasising repentance and God's forgiveness (Bernanos 2001, 143). As Mouchette still resists him he starts over again (Bernanos 2001, 146-149), but this time in anger and filled with pride because of his gift of knowledge. The priest's state of sin gives access to the satanic voice, and this second confession stresses the power of sin, the meaninglessness of life and the temptation of nothingness. Under the influence of the satanic voice Mouchette goes straight home and cuts her throat.

The tragic ambiguity of God's grace is the cross Donissan bears to the end. He is the first among a number of modern, ambiguous clerical characters in the twentieth century, such as the priest in Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* (1940).³⁰ In the second part of *Under Satan's Sun* Donissan becomes a saint, but he is never able to distinguish between God's and Satan's voices, and at the moment of death he asks Satan, "How long is it since you assumed the face and voice of my master? On what day did I yield to you for the first time?" (Bernanos 2001, 256).³¹

THE FOLDING UP OF THE FANTASTIC NARRATIVE

The narrator-poet unfolds the main theme of the novel as an elaborate fantastic narrative, which is his interpretation of the fragments documenting the saint's nocturnal experience. Surprisingly, however, the fantastic narrative is promptly folded up again in the next chapter by the priest's superior, Father Menou-Segrais. When Donissan tries as best he can to relate his experiences to his superior the next morning, the Father is "scarcely curious about the facts" (Bernanos 2001, 159) and quickly interrupts the young priest, saying that "the details don't matter" (Bernanos 2001, 160). The Father also states clearly that the question of whether Satan appears in the mind or in the external world is utterly unimportant:

How should I know whether or not you came face to face with the creature we meet every day, not at some bend in a road, unfortunately, but in ourselves? It doesn't matter to me whether you really saw him or it was a dream. What might seem to the ordinary run of men to be the most important episode is most often only an incidental matter to the humble servant of God. (Bernanos 2001, 165)³²

30. See Anne Loddegaard, "The Silence of God in the Modern Novel: Graham Greene and French Catholic Novelists Adopting a Pascalian Deus Absconditus Perspective on Faith, Truth and Reason", *The Forum on Public Policy: A Journal of the Oxford Round Table*, 2008.

31. "Depuis quand as-tu pris le visage et la voix de Mon Maître? Quel jour ai-je cédé pour la première fois?" (Bernanos 1961, 308)

32. "que vous ayez, ou non, vu face à face celui que nous rencontrons chaque jour – non point hélas! au détour d'un chemin, mais en nous-mêmes – comment le saurai-je? Le vîtes-vous réellement, ou

With these words the narrator lets the authoritative voice of the Church deconstruct all the aesthetic effects of the fantastic narrative just presented: both the fantastic hesitation and the detailed course of the satanic combat are irrelevant because in the Christian perspective the distinction between internal and external reality is a human illusion and the presence of Satan in ourselves is a sad, everyday occurrence. Accordingly, the rest of the novel develops the theme of good and evil by the use of theological concepts, without ever again using fantastic effects.

CONCLUSION

In light of Father Menou-Segrais' firm dismissal of the fantastic events we are led to conclude that the fantastic narrative is *composed for the sake of modern readers* who have supposedly lost the understanding of the religious meaning expressed by theological language.

The game of the initial fantastic hesitation during Donissan's fantastic wanderings activates the readers' religious emotions, preparing them to accept the narrator's final choice of the religious interpretation when the horse dealer is revealed to be Lucifer. And the supernatural is more plausible for modern readers because it is a synthesis of the Todorovian categories of the strange and the marvellous. The insertion of supernatural forces and events in the priest's mind is convincing for modern readers, including modern Catholics, who would probably reject a naive, medieval incarnation of the Devil in the external world.

Another benefit of the choice of a fantastic narrative is of course the narrative form itself. A narrative representation of the satanic temptation appeals to our religious emotions much more efficiently than theological discourse; the abstract concepts of God, Satan, temptation, sin, free will and grace are personified and visualised as characters and events acted out in a concrete setting and unfolded in a concrete span of time. Moreover, the combination of exceptionally vivid, detailed and realistic descriptions with supernatural phenomena in the narration of the combat with Satan integrates the religious dimension in our everyday world in a new and unique way. Above all, the original conception of the Satan character epitomises this supernatural naturalism. Equally far from the medieval beastly Devil with horns and a tail and from Milton's and the Romantics' noble and tragic

bien en songe, que m'importe? Ce qui peut paraître au commun des hommes l'épisode capital n'est le plus souvent, pour l'humble serviteur de Dieu, que l'accessoire." (Bernanos 1961, 223)

satanic figures, the coarse, prosaic horse dealer is a master stroke of religious realism, the embodiment of the satanic we all encounter in everyday life.

This religious realism is exactly the point of Father Menou-Segrais' subsequent folding up of the fantastic narrative and his translation of it into theological terms signifying Satan as an integral part of the everyday life of Christians. In this way the author invites the reader to follow the Father's lesson by translating his own fantastic reading experience into abstract theological language. Hence Bernanos uses both the unfolding and the folding up of the fantastic narrative as a rhetorical narrative strategy to persuade modern readers to accept the religious dimension of the novel and to introduce them to the religious meaning of the abstract concepts. The ultimate effect of the fantastic narrative is thus a potential revitalisation of the dogmatic language used elsewhere in *Under Satan's Sun*. The religious emotion produced by the fantastic narrative lingers on, colouring the reading of the rest of the novel, perhaps opening the reader's eyes to the religious drama and reality signified by the abstract concepts of the Church.

In this way the fantastic narrative rhetoric of *Under Satan's Sun* is an important renewal of the genre of the Catholic combat novel; it revitalises the dogmatic language without breaking the realistic framework of the genre, thus inviting modern readers to embark or reembark upon a religious quest.

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