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Meaning despite ambiguity: discourse of narrator and character in Bernanos' *Monsieur Ouine*

Abstract

The authenticity, even reality, of spiritual and imaginative experience has in recent years been put to a severe test by the human sciences. The work of Bernanos has this theme at its core. The character of Monsieur Ouine, especially seems to be a predecessor of many a deconstructionist critic. He submits a young boy to what can be called a counter-initiation whereby all meaning ceases to have any importance at all. At first glance there seems to be a marked resemblance between the style of the narrator and that of the discourse of Ouine, but a careful reading reveals in the narration a rhythm and the existence of a dense network of images which constitute the coherence of the work and point to an incarnational conception of language.

At the core of contemporary thinking, especially in what is termed *post-modernism*,¹ stands the problem of language: does language in particular or do signs in general give us access to reality, be it external or internal, or do they cut us off from ourselves and from the outside world? In its most radical version the problem appears as a will to link the inconsistency of the sign to the inexistence of being. For the practice of literary criticism, the pre-occupation with language for its own sake has led to formalistic approaches which take literary works as objects and take them apart in order to show how

1. As far as the central position of language is concerned one must take note of the thinking of K. O. Apel, especially his *Transformation der Philosophie* (1976) where he develops the notion of a transcendental linguistic community in which all thinkers (philosophers as well as scientists), past and present, take part.

they have purportedly been constructed. This practice is now commonly known as deconstruction.² At the end of this process of deconstruction one finds a meaningless void or one defers indefinitely the decision to come to an interpretation, how personal, partial, elusive and provisional it might have to admit to be.³ The critical mind, like a jellyfish, absorbs and turns to nothingness whatever drifts its way on the ocean of dissolvent verbal illusions. It is not so much that the deconstructionist does not want to find meaning, paradoxically, not wanting to do so is really what he wants to do, since he does away with all intentional communication.⁴ This radical attitude is not without fascination since it masquerades as a superiority of the mind over whatever it is confronted with. But under the surface of this self-indulgent criticism and curiosity one senses a deep feeling of frustration. The tenacity with which others are accused of self-delusion betrays a deeply-embedded longing to find some certainty oneself, combined with the resolution to pretend to stay master of one's own mind and to refuse whatever does not fall under its control or has not been theoretically conceived by itself. It stands to reason that the literature of fiction is the realm par excellence where demystification and deconstruction can thrive. But the distrust in which the products of human imagination are held is not a new phenomenon: the history of the reception and rejection of myths is a long one, as old as the myths themselves, inevitably so since myths themselves put on stage the possibilities of delusion and betrayal.⁵ It can safely be said that all great novelists have suffered under the problematic authenticity of their fiction not only as works of art, but in relationship to their own lives and to the world to which they seek to convey density and meaning. The very distance consciousness creates between the mind and reality asks to be filled. This search for continuity can take the path of fiction and the question is whether fiction can fulfil that role?

Among 20th century novelists who have made the problem of the authenticity of spiritual and imaginative experience the theme of their novelistic quest the name of Georges Bernanos⁶ stands out, partly because his novels not only

2. Literature on deconstruction is numerous and bears out the validity of Heidegger's dictum that a great deal of talking about a problem does not in the least guarantee its solution. The reason for the problematic state of affairs seems to me to be the fact that some notions and apodictic affirmations by Derrida have been accepted uncritically and applied at random and indiscriminately. What is in fact a very obscure and questionable metaphysical thought has been taken for a paradoxical theory of reading applicable to all sorts of texts (cf. Descombes (1985:418–444) in the introductory notes to a special volume of *Critique*). It is indeed still debatable whether the final word has been said about the concepts of man, subject, meaning and history, and about the reality these concepts intend to foreground.
3. At least in the work of some German philosophers the alternative between super-theory and pragmatism has been convincingly put forward in the guise of hermeneutics, especially in the work of Manfred Frank who insists that a change in the meaning of a sign is always motivated.
4. For a discussion of the problem of non intentional meaning and the inconsequence of theory see W.J.T. Mitchell (1985).
5. To understand the complexity of the problem one can consult Fuhrmann (1971) and Blumenberg (1979).
6. For a complete survey of the works and the literature about Bernanos, see Joseph Jurt (1972).

invent stories and characters but also because these characters incarnate an experience of spiritual and religious nature. In these novels the mystery of incarnation finds its fictive manifestation. It comes as no surprise that in several of his works we find characters who are *intellectuals*, men of letters who, in the light of the recent developments in literary criticism as we have sketched them, are deconstructionists *avant la lettre*. The character of Monsieur Ouine, who gives his name to the last novel Bernanos published, is an especial case in point. The interpretation of this novel allows the exploration of certain moral aspects of the *crisis of the sign* but before coming to the core of the matter it is doubtlessly necessary to present this work to those readers who might not be familiar with it.

Monsieur Ouine

Bernanos started to work on the novel in February 1931, and was only able to finish it in May 1940. Twice during that period he lost important parts of the manuscript in motorcycle accidents. While working on it, he published four other novels which blossomed naturally, two of which became bestsellers. His *Monsieur Ouine*, however, appeared in France at last in 1946, and the first correct and complete edition saw the light only in 1955, seven years after his death. Critics and scholars have always been at pains to come to grips with the work; the reasons for their difficulty in doing so being its apparent lack of internal coherence.⁷ At the time of publication, the work transgressed some of the most basic rules of the novel as literary genre and it still poses problems even to readers who have become used to all the often eccentric artificialities of avant-garde writing. Time, space and causality are subverted so that total ambiguity reigns as far as plot, characters and setting are concerned. It is a work without a centre, it has no real beginning and no satisfactory conclusion. The composition is very loose: the nineteen episodes are merely juxtaposed, each starting in medias res; in between, important events take place which are not recounted. The ultimate fate of several characters is not revealed. As a whole, the book is so disorganized that it would hardly stand the test of readability which seems to be one of the cardinal criteria of narratology when seeking what is called the narrativity of narrative. There is a semblance of plot at the beginning of the fifth chapter when the corpse of a young farmhand is discovered and an inquiry is started to identify the murderer. Later, a poacher

The same author has published a comprehensive work on the reception Bernanos' work received (1981).

7. *Monsieur Ouine* has been the object of several attempts at exegesis. W. Bush (1966) tries to reconstruct a coherent intrigue from the apparently incoherent sequence of separated episodes. This endeavour has been criticised by Pierre-Robert Leclercq (1978). Volumes 5 and 10 of the *Etudes bernanosiennes* are devoted to the same novel. One of the latest and most interesting interpretations is the one in Pierre Gile (1984:126–330) which is conducted in relationship to the tension between letter and spirit. Our quotations are from the following edition: Bernanos, G. 1961. *Oeuvres romanesques*. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Paris: Gallimard.

commits suicide together with his wife, because he has been accused, but we never know if he is indeed the murderer. His wife, in any case, does not bother to find out. In fact we will never know who committed the crime. During the funeral of the shepherd, the whole community lynches the castelan's wife, Madame de Néréis, without any apparent motive. The mayor of the village disappears and we are led to believe that he too has committed suicide. Several other plots are never developed to their narrative end. The character who gives his name to the book dies at the end, but we do not know exactly when. Philippe, the little boy who is present during Ouine's agony, leaves the room, thinking his old mentor is dead, only to find him alive and sitting in an armchair when he returns. And Ouine continues to talk before dying a second time. We do not know whether this second death has been dreamt by the little boy. So the book has the same coherence as one would find in a string of nightmares, each beginning in the middle of things and ending before its conclusion. We are never sure if events related happen in reality or are only dreamt or imagined by the different characters. In short, there is no way of establishing what is happening.

However, Bernanos himself considered this work to be his most important, his *magnum opus*; but the different critics and specialists on his work also agree that *Monsieur Ouine* is a great novel, perhaps even one of the most important books published during the first half of the 20th century. Some even call it prophetic and do not hesitate to compare it with the apocalypse. It is true that Monsieur Ouine very often uses Biblical phraseology and that he is living in a community which has reached an advanced state of disintegration. But even for readers who are not familiar with Biblical texts it is a fascinating work because its incoherence is clearly not of the same nature as the one which can be found in so many experimental novels, where this incoherence is deliberate and artificial. The enigmatic nature of the book is not the result of the systematic application of stylistic devices, nor is it a consequence of the long period of gestation or the lack of continuity in the writing. It is so rich and dense that its mystery seems to reside in the fact that the book intends to symbolise the essence of evil; this purpose is in itself complicated since the author believes that evil is the same as nothingness which can only exist as a parasite of reality. The problem of the work can thus be formulated as follows: how can a work of art be composed on a negative principle which must lead to incoherence in the very form of the work? Bernanos found the solution in constructing his novel as a bad dream.⁸ But before this idea is developed further the text itself should be approached so that the reader is introduced to the character who gives his name to the book,

8. Bernanos himself has said that a novelist is he who realises the dreams of his childhood. The dream in Bernanos' vision is ambiguous. The grand dream is the one which incites the child to embark on the realisation of all the possibilities and virtualities he explores with the aid of imagination; the bad dream is the unreality of that which is not yet realised, an unreality which is preferred to reality. The dream is co-natural to fiction in as far as it presents possibilities which can be or are not yet realised: fiction is the realm of virtuality.

Monsieur Ouine. The fact that his name is used as the title of the book seems to indicate that everything revolves around him, although he directly appears only in six out of the 19 chapters or episodes, of which the last three describe his agony and death. In this respect Ouine lives a life similar to that of a *deus absconditus*, a hidden god, because in some way he seems to be linked to whatever happens in Fenouille, the village where the action is situated, without being directly or visibly present. Monsieur Ouine is a retired professor of modern languages, author of a new method of language teaching and as such commands a certain mastery of speech which enables him to mesmerise all who meet him. He exerts a mysterious fascination and this fascination accounts largely for the fascination that the book itself exerts on the reader. His name attracts our attention since it is quite uncommon and clearly symbolic as it combines the two particles of assertion *oui/yes* and *ne/no* (one could translate his name as *Yesno*): first of all the name suggest, in its female ending (*ouine* in stead of *ouinon*), a certain sexual ambiguity and indeed, Ouine had in his childhood been the victim of homosexual attention from one of his teachers and he himself shows a marked attraction towards young boys. Sexually ambiguous at least, or indifferent, Ouine is somebody who refuses to distinguish between opposites, between good and evil, and who is therefore totally indifferent to the value of things. His first appearance in the novel can be considered as illuminating. This significant episode is related in the third chapter.

Quine's room

Monsieur Ouine has been offered hospitality by the inhabitants of the little castle situated near the village of Fenouille in which the family of a little boy by the name of Philippe whose father disappeared during the First World War also lives. His mother and his English governess give him the nickname Steeny after a character in a favourite novel of the latter; this in itself is already an important fact but this idea will be developed later in this study. The lady of the castle comes to fetch little Philippe, because her husband wants to tell him before he dies that his father is not dead but simply did not come back: the quest for the disappeared father could thus become one of the themes (or *narremes*) in the novel, but the encounter between Philippe and Ouine diverts the former from his youthful dreams of heroism and self-realisation, mainly because of the influence of Ouine's glibness, who impresses on the little boy the futility of all endeavour. As he says himself: he will teach him how to love death and to find comfort in the emptiness of passing time. The episode of this all-important encounter between the youth and the retired professor begins with a description of the room where Ouine lives. Later Ouine himself also describes his own room; a comparison of the two passages can give us an insight into the very nature of that peculiar fascination exerted by Ouine. First the description by the narrator:

La chambre de M. Ouine est tapissée de papier rose un peu fané, mais propre, et il a

lui-même blanchi le plafond à la chaux. Malheureusement la crasse séculaire réapparaît sous les badigeons, y dessine des caps, des golfes, des îles, toute une géographie mystérieuse. (p. 1361–1362)

Mr Ouine's room is papered with clean though somewhat faded pink wallpaper. The ceiling he had whitewashed himself. Unfortunately, longstanding grime shows through the paint, outlining the headlands, bays and islands of a strange geographical relief.

One can say that this description is straightforward insofar as it concentrates on visible elements such as the colour and texture of the walls. The only narrative element is the indication that Ouine has painted the ceiling himself. The description of the ceiling nevertheless contains a figurative device, namely a comparison of the pattern created on the ceiling by the humidity with that of a maritime map. This comparison, however, is visual, for it has its origin in what is objectively visible. Below is Ouine's description of the same room to Philippe who is in it with him.

Oui, des jours et des jours, cette chambre que vous voyez là, si niaise avec son lit de bonne, sa cuvette et son pot, a été comme un petit navire battu par la mer. C'est moi qui ai voulu son dénuement, sa pauvreté grossière si favorable à un demi-sommeil, riche en rêves. Que de fois ai-je dû frotter, cirer, polir les carreaux rouges avant que se dissipât cette odeur de moisissure et d'eau morte qui sort ici des murs mêmes, empoisonne jusqu'à l'air du jardin! J'ai dû curer les joints, pavé par pavé, les imber de chlore comme autant de petites plaies! Oh! vous ne me croirez pas, jeune homme: la boue ainsi mordue par l'acide, la boue d'un siècle ou deux, tirée de sa longue sécheresse, n'en finissait pas de sortir petit à petit sous mes doigts, d'y éclater en grosses bulles grises. Je me couchais exténué, tout en sueur, avec encore dans l'oreille ce claquement mou, horrible. Le passé est diablement tenace, mon garçon. (p. 1362)

Don't be surprised to find me here Phillipe, don't pity me. I love this house. I have experienced unforgettable times here. Yes, for days and days on end, this room you see here so absurdly simple with its servant's bed, its washbasin and the chamberpot, has been like a tiny boat battered by the sea. I'm the one who wanted its bareness, its vulgar poverty, so conducive to halfsleep, richly peopled by dreams. How many times I've had to scrub, wax and polish the red tiles before I got rid of that smell of mould and stagnant water that comes out of the very walls and poisons even the air in the garden. I had to clean out the joints, slab by slab, soak them in chlorine, just like so many little wounds. Oh! you won't believe me young man, the mud eaten into by the acid, the mud of one or two centuries, drawn out of long dryness, just kept on coming out little by little under my fingers, bursting in large, grey bubbles. I would go to bed exhausted, bathed in perspiration, with that horrible, flabby gurgle still ringing in my ears. The past is devilishly tenacious, my boy.

This passage opens up several ways of penetrating to the core of the novel. First Ouine discerns a possible resistance in his little companion and then starts to describe the room. The first sentence of this description also contains an image: the room is compared with a little boat battered by the sea. But contrary to the image used by the narrator this one is not visual; it certainly belongs to the same semantic field but it is in fact a common place since the comparison rests upon an idea, it does not result from a glance towards reality but from a glance towards language; to be more precise, a glance towards an element which belongs to language used as a code made up of ready-made and pre-existent expressions. Ouine replaces reality by a concept, by the idea

he himself has of it; so reality is only there to confirm his own imaginative and cognitive capacities. An in replacing reality by its concept, idea or sign, he empties it of its concrete value and presence. And that is what Ouine wants his room to be: a place where he can indulge in daydreaming and inactivity. Thus we can understand that for Ouine reality is only there to allow him to dream, to while away his time. He transforms concrete and tangible reality into absence, and the means he uses is conceptual language.⁹ One might object that Ouine just mentioned three concrete objects, but again these three selected objects form part of a stereotype one can find in any naturalistic or popular novel. They serve the idea Ouine has and wants to impose upon Philippe; since he himself gives the abstract definition, the significance of these objects in the following sentence is revealed by using the concepts of bareness and poverty.

While quoting the word “poverty” a second stylistic device attracts our attention, namely the antithesis of poverty and wealth: the poverty of concrete reality corresponds to the richness of irreality. At that moment, Ouine starts telling a story, the story of his room, and how he cleaned it. This story is fascinating through the minuteness and precision of the details as much as through the harmony of its rhythm based on binary and ternary movements, syntactic parallelisms, alliterations, repetitions; one could even detect an onomatopoeic effect in the frequency of “ps” and “bs” which imitate the sound of the exploding mud bubbles. This passage sounds like a prose poem. But what a contrast between this beautiful language and the horror described! In these sentences we can feel the effort necessary to surmount disgust and to arrive at the voluntary acceptance of humiliation. And this experience, which we have to come back to, is exactly the one Ouine wants to impress upon his new-found disciple.

It should not be forgotten that Ouine is busy describing the room where he is together with Philippe, who can observe it for himself and can perhaps have a different idea, or can experience a feeling of revolt which Ouine prevents in the sentence, “do not be astonished, do not pity me”. Ouine selects the elements which are relevant for his own purpose. We cannot fail to notice that Ouine insists on the poverty of his room, but this poverty is not exalting, it is

9. Ever since Hegel pointed out that words do not coincide with the referents they designate and that language thus is characterised by the phenomenon of absence of the outside world, poets have had to ask what validity their works, made of words, can have. More generally, all thinking which is based on representation and on the opposition subject-object is doomed to be cut off from reality since it is concerned and can only be concerned with the representation of things inside the mind and not with the things themselves. Phenomenology has tried to surmount this problem with its concept of intentionality. The answer, as philosophers like Michel Henry (1963 and 1985) point out, is to be found in the fact that our mind is affected by reality. What is residual in all representations and signs is affection, a prereflexive consciousness of the world. Affectivity is one of the *a priori a parte subjecti*; certainly, the affectivity can not be conceptualised but that does not prevent it from being real. Even scientists like Konrad Lorenz, from the point of view of ethology, recognise the reality of feelings and values (1983).

degrading, almost ridiculous, for it is meant as a voluntary humiliation for the people who have to live there. One has to surmount an instinctive reaction of disgust to accept the room as it is; there is, therefore, the need for an explanation. But it is exactly this victory over disgust which Ouine wants to obtain from Philippe in order to poison the pure source of pity which is still in him. He himself says so immediately prior to the description we are commenting on:

Ah! Philippe, souhaitez de connaître la pitié, avant que l'expérience du dégoût en ait empoisonné la source! (p. 1362)

Ah! Philippe, wish to know pity before the experience of disgust has poisoned its source!

Ouine is doing exactly that: he is intent on poisoning the pure source of pity which is still present in the boy. Later, Philippe recognises Ouine as his mentor, but to be able to do this he has to surmount an irresistible surge of disgust which amounts to a voluntary humiliation inflicted upon himself, a silly victory over himself which is tantamount to a kind of self-hatred. He is quite aware of the fact that Ouine is a disgusting person: he is old and terminally ill, his lungs are rotten, his body resembles that of an old woman; in fact, he is the opposite of everything Philippe has associated with the heroes of his own childhood. And from this counter-hero he receives what one could call a counter-initiation. But such are the powers of Monsieur Ouine that he is able to make decadence seem valuable; while listening to him, acceptance, inactivity and day-dreaming become worthwhile occupations. And to achieve this negative alchemy Ouine relies on language. But the harmony of his speech, as we have shown, is totally indifferent to the reality it transforms. This indifference makes him comparable to an idol, which suggests the portrait that the narrator presents of him:

M Ouine était assis au bord du lit, les jambes pendantes, un chapeau melon posé sur les genoux, sa vareuse boutonnée jusqu'au col, ses gros souliers soigneusement cirés. On l'eût pris volontiers pour une sorte de contremaître n'était l'extraordinaire noblesse d'un visage aux lignes si simples, si pures que ni l'âge, ni la souffrance, ni même l'empâtement d'une mauvaise graisse n'en altéraient jamais la bienveillance profonde, l'expression de calme et lucide acceptation. (p. 1362)

Mr Ouine was seated on the edge of the bed, his legs dangling, a bowler hat perched on his knees, his jacket buttoned up to the neck, his heavy shoes painstakingly polished. One could easily have mistaken him for a works foreman were it not for the extraordinary nobility of his face. Its lines were so simple, so pure, that neither age, nor suffering, nor even the coarseness of unsightly fat had changed its expression of profound kindness, of calm, lucid acceptance.

What strikes us in this portrait is the immobility of the face: its expression never changes, it has the inalterability of the masque, it is the face of an idol. And again we notice this strange combination of decay and fascination. As far as its form is concerned, this passage presents several similarities with the speech of Monsieur Ouine himself. And this is one of the most fascinating but most problematic aspects of the novel: the linguistic means used by the

character who thrives on decay and destruction, who corrupts other people by his way of speaking, seem to be the same as those used by the narrator. We notice the same harmonious rhythm of binary and ternary movements. And on this level we encounter one of the essential ambiguities of the work which we should like to interpret. This ambiguity is of a very complex nature and touches the essence of creative fiction itself, which exists only through the use of language. What are we to make of a text in which a character uses the same language as the narrator but strives towards a contrary effect? Ouine destroys reality by putting its verbal representation, its idea or concept, in its place, whereas the author of the book pretends to create a work of art by using that very same language. That is the problem posed by Bernanos' novel, and there is no linguistic or semiotic solution to that kind of problem because linguistics and semiotics are constantly at pains to steer clear of it, by decreeing that signs only function inside a system and never question their relationship with reality or that of their value. In fact these disciplines of the human sciences substitute systems of signs for reality, as does Monsieur Ouine. More recently the sign itself has been subjected to the now well-known assault by deconstruction. The prophetic value of Bernanos' novel converges at this point: its main character is a deconstructionist *avant la lettre*. But in his case this is not only an intellectual activity: Bernanos shows convincingly that the destructive, analytical powers of the mind find their basis and origin in a decision which itself is of a moral nature.

Pity

The words of Ouine we have quoted contain two moral and generalizing statements, one about pity, which precedes his description of the room and one about the tenacity of time which serves as conclusion to his story of the room. They constitute two important aspects of the initiation Philippe receives from Monsieur Ouine. And for the reader the question remains, why Ouine has chosen the room as a sort of allegorical basis for his initiation. From ulterior remarks both by Ouine and by the narrator in that same third chapter it is clear that this poisoning of the pure source of pity consists in its diversion from the original objective pole, diversion from its intentional movement outwards towards oneself and thereby becoming a self-affirmation. As we have already suggested, this pity consists in a voluntary self-humiliation which confers a certain grandeur on the subject in so far as it humiliates itself. This poisoned pity is no longer self-oblivion but a discovery of one's own value and its instant negation. It is therefore essentially different from real humility. Thus pity becomes a way of experiencing oneself, of exerting one's own powers over oneself. As a consequence the human being stays bottled up in itself. This type of pity results from a victory over revolt: but revolt would be positive in as far as it incites to action, whereas self-pity indulges in passive self-commiseration. This pity is not founded in empathy with one's fellow sufferer but in apathy. At one stage Philippe declares his admiration for

Ouine by saying that he would follow him to the end of the world, whereupon Ouine replies that one can only go to the end of oneself and thereby implies that everybody is enclosed in his own consciousness (chapter three). That is one of the moral lessons Ouine gives his disciple during their first encounter. The consequences are easy to understand: the mind becomes a central void where everything is absorbed and annihilated.

Time

The second aspect of the counter-initiation concerns time. The whole story of how Ouine managed to clean his room is summarized in his final and conclusive statement about the tenacity of the past which has to be overcome. Philippe reacts instantly by saying that the past is not important, not even the present, that only the future counts but Ouine looks at him with such intense sadness that Philippe stops in the middle of the sentence. And later Ouine explains to him how he can fill himself with the passing of the present moment. Again the outward movement of consciousness, this time towards the future, is diverted and returned to its origin whereby time loses all its tension. This is the paradox and the secret of Ouine's inner life, if one can call it that: he has decided to stay in the present moment which (in fact) is precisely the dimension of time which ceases to be as soon as it is. Throughout the novel this aspect of time is related to the reality of the human soul, which of course has ceased to be in Ouine himself since there is no inner tension in him. It might be useful to recall the definition of time as Saint Augustine¹⁰ formulated it in the 11th book of his confessions, where he defines time as *extentio animi* whereby the soul is tending towards its salvation beyond the inevitable moment of death as it becomes conscient in every passing moment.

But Ouine decides to install himself in this moment and thereby has learned to love death. It must be added that, in the case of Ouine, death is not the moment where the human soul enters in the realm of transcendence: for him death is the evaporation of the self into nothingness.¹¹ And that is why he is inseparably linked to decay, corruption and destruction. Where he is, time ceases to tend towards *something*. And there seems to be a definite link

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10. Augustine's meditations about time are aptly interpreted by Henry Guitton (1933); Jacques Garelli (1983); Paul Ricoeur (1983). Garelli (1969) shows convincingly that Derrida's thinking on time, from Parmenides to Husserl, is based on a misunderstanding of some basic texts, namely Aristotle's *Physics* 1, 2, 185 and 12 (as interpreted by Aubenque (1966)) which has been held responsible, since Heidegger's interpretation, for the *metaphysics of presence* and the Eleventh Book of Augustine's *Confessions*. The privileged position of the present moment is endangered right from Aristotle's meditation on the *now*; Augustine transformed the punctuality of the present moment into the extension of the spirit, thereby ruining the famous metaphysics of presence. See Garelli (1969:874–896).
 11. Several concepts of death are possible, one of them being the conception of the end of life as total annihilation, this is the so-called second death in the Book of Revelations. For a profound meditation about the mystery of death, see Jüngel (1971) and Jankélévitch (1977).

between this way of experiencing time and the time as it is structured in the novel.

These two developments with regard to pity and time represent moral aspects of what is more than simply an intellectual attitude, and we have to relate them to our central preoccupation about the validity and pertinence of fiction, about its meaning. I personally think that meaning or sense exists precisely in relationships and that interpretation consists in the clarification of these relationships. The question now is to relate Philippe's counter-initiation to the ambiguity of language. This can be done if the effect of the counter-initiation on Philippe is understood and this can be explored in the second part of the third chapter. The question about the house will be answered as soon as the interpretation of the third chapter forces the reader to search for links with other episodes of the novel.

A world of fiction

Philippe is aware of the fact that something has happened to him, that he has changed, that this very day is decisive for his whole life. We would summarise this by saying that he has ceased to be a child. But the consequences are much more complicated than this generalising formula suggests. This complexity becomes evident in a passage where the narrator explains these changes. The passage will allow us at the same time to observe aspects of narrative technique which can broaden our insight and improve the formulation of the central problem:

Sur le seuil, M. Ouine lui fait un signe amical, referme soigneusement la porte. Mais c'est en vain que Philippe prête l'oreille. Le merveilleux silence de la petite chambre paraît seulement s'ébranler, virer doucement autour d'un axe invisible. Il croyait le sentir glisser sur son front, sur sa poitrine, sur ses paumes ainsi que la caresse de l'eau. A quelle profondeur descendrait-il, vers quel abîme de paix? Jamais encore au cours de cette journée capitale, il ne s'était senti plus loin de l'enfance, des joies et des peines d'hier, de toute joie, de toute peine. Ce monde, auquel il n'osait pas croire, le monde haï de Michelle – "Tu rêves, Steeny, pouah!" – le monde de la paresse et du songe qui avait jadis englouti le faible aïeul, l'horizon fabuleux, les lacs d'oubli, les voix immenses – lui était brusquement ouvert et il se sentait assez fort pour y vivre entre tant de fantômes, épié par leurs milliers d'yeux, jusqu'au suprême faux pas. "Chez nous, aucune chance de vaincre, il faut tomber; M. Ouine lui-même tombera". Ainsi parlaient toutes les bouches d'ombre. Et pour lui, Philippe, en vérité qu'importe. Il s'étonne seulement de ne pouvoir faire une place à son nouveau maître parmi ses héros favoris. Quelle sérénité autour de ce bonhomme épais, au front livide . . .

"C'est peut-être ce qu'ils appellent un saint?" pense Philippe avec une terreur comique. (p. 1365–66)

Standing in the doorway Mr Ouine gives him a friendly wave and carefully closes the door. But it's in vain that Philippe strains his ears. The wondrous silence of the little room seems only to glide into motion, swinging gently on an invisible axis. He thought he could feel it sliding over his forehead, his chest, his palms, like the caress of water. How far would he sink into the deep abyss of peace? Never, during this momentous day, had he felt further from childhood, from the joys and sufferings of yesterday, from all joys and sufferings. That world, in which he dared not believe, Michelle's hated world –

You're dreaming Steeny, bah!" – the world of sluggishness and dreams which had swallowed up the feeble ancestor, the prodigious horizon, the lakes of oblivion, the immense voices – that world suddenly opened up before him and he felt strong enough to live in it, amongst so many phantoms, spied upon by their thousand-fold eyes, until the ultimate blunder. "Here with us, there's no chance of victory, one has to fall. Mr Ouine himself will fall". Thus spoke all the shadowy mouths. And for him – Philippe – did it really matter after all? He merely felt surprised at being unable to make a place for his new found master alongside his favourite heroes. What serenity emanates from this stocky fellow, with his bald forehead . . . "Is he perhaps what they call a saint?" thinks Philippe, filled with comic terror.

This passage again strikes the reader by its richness and by the variation of the stylistic devices used. The first two sentences are straightforward in noting what happens at the moment of occurrence. Philippe is now alone in the room and listens. But from the third sentence onward we again encounter a binary construction which centres around the pivot of the semi-colon between the two verbs that literally revolve around that dead point; we can feel the axis around which the silence turns and thus the movement of the sentence manifests its content. In the next sentence we suddenly pass from the present tense to the imperfect although the sequence of events is not interrupted; it is simply that they are now presented as belonging to a dimension which is not the present moment as it would figure in an irreversible and linear temporal and narrative sequence. The predicate of this sentence is modal, and insists on the effect the silence has on the character, the way he feels that silence as water running down his body. We are here in the imaginary world as suggested by the comparison between silence and water. This smoothness becomes tangible in the ternary movement combined with the repetition of the preposition *sur* which adds to the frequency of the dental aspirants and this movement of immersion is without any fear or anxiety. In the following sentence the binary movements and again the repetition of *peine* and *joie* almost create the rhythm of a lullaby, conducive to gentle daydreaming. And so it happens in the following sentence that Philippe's experience of the silence in reality opens up and is invaded by an imaginary utterance. The hyphen in the middle of the sentence causes it to burst like a bubble on the surface of a pool of mud. This inserted proposition of which we do not know the origin (it might be a reminiscence or something imagined at the same moment, a sentence pronounced by Michelle, his mother or by his governess) belongs to another world inside reality and contains what Philippe is dreaming as he ceases to be present to what is around him. At this moment he bathes in an oneiric dimension comparable to the fiction one can find in a novel, as the inverted commas used to demarcate direct speech suggest. But now Philippe is able to let himself go into that other world without fear, without reluctance. And that is the consequence of his initiation. Suddenly Philippe enters into the world of dreams and phantoms, he is in another dimension which quickly opens in the middle of reality and closes again, like the bubbles Ouine observed while cleaning the floor of his room.

The fascination of unreality

This entrance into the world of fiction occurs through the harmonious rhythms of poetic language, because this passage again is clearly poetic in its harmony, in the way its form is a manifestation of the content, the way in which language becomes creative or what is meant by it. It should be added immediately that the use of this device, whereby hyphens open up a sentence in the middle (from the inside, as it were) and make it burst under the irresistible pressure of imagination (whereby reality is sucked up from the inside by a dimension which I would call oneiric, since it is similar to dreams or hallucinations) is very frequent throughout the novel. Philippe is not the only character who succumbs to the fascination of unreality. Most characters are able to let themselves sink into this state of reduplication and derive from it a pleasure comparable to that of a caress. And in that sense they become characters in a fiction they invent themselves. That is why it is not at all without importance that Philippe's nickname Steeny comes from a novel. He himself says to the castelan's wife that she resembles a character of a novel. All of them play a role and seem to be unable to resist the fascination of an inner imaginary world, where they cease to be themselves, where they retire from reality, as Ouine puts it, in the little boat battered by the sea. In that state they are beyond pain and joy, totally indifferent to reality around them. And so it happens that the reader very often is not sure whether what is related really happens to the characters, or whether it happens in their dreams. There is a constant rivalry or interaction between the world of fiction, the world of unreality and that of reality, and this battle finds place in the consciousness of the characters, and the arms used in that battle are verbal images. There is no doubt that this world is congenial to that of literature, as is suggested in the quotation from Baudelaire – "les lacs d'oubli"¹² – a poet who explored the inner world of imagination as opposed to that of rugged reality. In that respect this experience of entrance into the oneiric dimension is clearly analogous to that of entering a fictional world as it is created by words in the novel.

Unending discourse

And so we have to come back to our professor of modern languages, the one who is able to talk and to put words in the place of reality. Whenever he is present he talks; he talks until he dies, and he talks well. He knows everything, I would almost say he knows every trick in the book, so to speak the Book with a capital letter, because he constantly sounds like a spokesman for the author of the Book of Proverbs. He never does anything himself but makes other people do things, he changes them, he moves them around as a novelist would do with his characters. So he could be considered to be a caricature of the creative Word as it is presented at the beginning of the gospel

12. This image is in the poem "Les phares", in Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal*.

according to St John.¹³ And so Monsieur Ouine becomes somebody who simultaneously is author and character, this interpretation being based on the analogy commented on previously; and analogy which serves as an explanation or even as a causality, as is the case in myths or in dreams.

Destructive fiction and poetic language

In this little village of Fenouille lives another family which is destroyed by fiction, the family of the Vandommès, to which belongs Hélène, the wife of the poacher who is falsely accused of the murder of the shepherd. Her father is consumed by pride in his family and does not want to recognise his son-in-law and asks him to commit suicide as soon as he features among the suspects. But the pride of the family is based on a story told by a fugitive soldier during the Napoleonic wars, and who ascribes nobility to the family of the Vandommès. That soldier, wearing a green tunic, was as tiny and as versatile as a monkey. We know that in folk tales the devil very often comes in the disguise of a wanderer clad as a hunter, wearing a green tunic. This story, which is probably invented, has continued to poison the family, entralling them to a false pride, imprisoning them in the false image they had of themselves.

So clearly fiction in this novel leads to disaster. How then can somebody want to write a novel while holding the conviction that verbal representation of reality is of the same nature as unreality? And what is more, that unreality is active, actively destructive. And here again we are confronted with a seemingly, inextricable ambiguity: in order to show this destructive power of fiction one has to use the same means, the same medium; one has to use language, one has to use verbal images. And again we must say that, in fact, language can be used without relationship to reality. That is after all the basic postulate of modern linguistics and semiotics – that language in particular and all signs in general have nothing to do with reality. However, pure combinatory usage of language is not the only one. What is more, in the case of poetic language, the text attains a density and coherence such that it ceases to be a mere combination of signs in the realm of self-reflectiveness and forces the reader to forget about its form, inviting him to open up the text towards his own experience of the world.

To understand this poetic force one must return to the text. Philippe now accepts life in the world of imagination, which is also the world of defeat, the world of indifference; what is more, the world of a defeat accepted in advance. In this world he listens only to inner voices who talk to him in a fascinating whisper and tell him that good and evil are not different, everything is verbal image and that in that world spiritual values are

13. One might wonder whether contemporary attempts to destroy the sign, especially the verbal sign, is not inspired by the beginning of the gospel of St. John who accords creative power to the word.

impersonated. Philippe's question is typical: he asks himself whether Ouine is what one would call a saint, not knowing the difference between sign and reality. Nothing is certain anymore, he is totally isolated in the inner sea of imagination and isolation. And now we can take up again this image which compares a house to a ship.

The image of the house

At several moments in the novel we find this image in which a house or a room is compared with a ship. On the first page we already encounter it. Little Philippe inhales the strong odours of a sunny afternoon and gets a little bedazzled by them, suddenly falling asleep. At that moment the room is filled with wind and the walls start trembling like the sails of a ship. So the little boy sets out on the inner sea of an hallucinatory experience. The image is repeated by Monsieur Ouine, as has been pointed out earlier. Later, the morning after Philippe's first encounter with Ouine, Philippe tells everything to his best friend, his alter ego, a cripple by the name of Guillaume, who also belongs to the Vandommes family. It is at daybreak, and while the boys are talking the house slowly emerges from darkness as a "naïve" hull of a ship emerging from the water. The image is almost similar in form to that used by Ouine in his description of his own room. But we have seen that Ouine establishes the link between room and boat on the abstract level of what a linguist would call a *signifié*, the concept linked arbitrarily to a sequence of sounds. But in the case of Guillaume's house emerging like a ship, the image is situated in reality; it stems from the way in which the house makes itself visible to the boys and makes its presence felt. Therefore, as soon as the house is totally visible after the wind has chased away a small cloud of fog which has surrounded it for a moment, the boys instinctively turn around in fear of being overheard by the house. The meaning of the house, which is still naïve and shining despite its age, new and shining at every daybreak, is much more than a construction of walls and roof, because it has carried the family through the ocean of time and has served as a true haven of warmth, stability and experience. When Philippe, after his initiation, talks of his own home (his father is not there in any case) he calls it a cube of cement which will melt in the water and leave a pool of mould.

Towards the end of the novel, during a conversation with Madame Marchal who has agreed to tend to the needs of the dying Monsieur Ouine, Philippe again uses the image of the house. He explains to her that Ouine can talk about everything, and that when he has finished talking, things and people cease to be interesting; they become meaningless, ridiculous and empty. And life, says Philippe, is equally empty, like a house in which one wanders around in endless corridors lined with dirty mirrors in which one hears only similarly the echo of one's own voice and only sees one's own image. When Ouine and Philippe use a word, the word "house" in this instance, they do not talk about a real house but about its idea, about its concept, and develop the latter into

an allegory. But for the reader this way of talking, fascinating as it is, manifests the inner state of both characters; they are in fact talking about their own minds which function as a mirror reflecting only images and representations, concepts severed from reality. Their minds are a palace of mirrors in which concepts reflect each other, every one being the same as any other, because in the innermost mind, in its deep structure, there is only a single logical opposition, which is indifferent in any case, devoid of content and meaningless.

Ambiguity and meaning

That is what Philippe has learned from the retired professor of modern languages: to sail around in the inner sea of reflections. And it is true that water can also be a mirror, and that water is the universal solvent. Philippe tells the story of a bottle drifting in the water but the bottle is empty, it contains no message. But this operation of the character's mind by which he empties things and beings of their meaning and turns them into absence, becomes the manifestation of a frame of mind which we readers can observe from the outside. So their destructive operations become meaningful for us.

At the same time the narrator shows us a way in which images can reveal how reality comes to be present and meaningful; so the image ceases to be a way of speaking and instead, reveals the meaning of reality, which is founded in dynamic relationships between, for instance, a house and a little boat with the house rising out of darkness as the boat out of water. Although we find total incoherence on the level of narration we cannot fail to see the coherence on the level of the images which enter in dynamic relationships which are never univocal, giving possibilities of further relationships. These relationships are not mechanical, nor are they systematic: in these images one finds not mere ambiguity but a surplus of meaning, a density and energy which invites or induces the reader to meditate about them. And this is possible because these images concern universals. In our case the house is a dwelling where men could find peace and stability, warmth and shelter against the destructive forces in the universe.¹⁴ The coherence of the novel is thus not narrative but poetic. This poetic language attains an extraordinary degree of density in the last three chapters which relate the agony and death of Monsieur Ouine, where the text achieves the near impossible: to render, or better, to manifest the way Ouine returns to nothingness. Of course he does not stop talking and he describes with horrific precision his own death as an invagination, as a return into his own belly. He is then literally a flow of air, a *flatus vocis* and throughout the text the images and sound combinations turn around the theme of Ouine-outré vide/Ouine-empty cask, each semantic chain corresponding to a phonetic theme.

14. On the heuristic character of the image see Paul Ricoeur (1975).

Conclusion

But it is time to conclude. Our original problem can now be formulated as follows: on the level of composition the voids between the episodes correspond to the bubbles which open the narrative from the inside in order to show an underlying tension between dream and reality. This tension corresponds to the opposition between conceptualizing language and language as manifestation, as creative poetry. There are two contradictory movements, that of incarnation within which is situated its opposite – the movement of excarnation. These movements correspond to attitudes of consciousness of the characters who can return to themselves, close themselves inside self-pity and delusion (excarnation) or open up to reality where they can realise themselves (incarnation). In other words: the world of fiction as well as language as such is situated in the realm of virtuality and possibility. They are unreal insofar as they have not been realised yet. So two ways lead from that unreality: one of excarnation into nothingness where unreality is preferred as such and substituted to reality, that is the world of dreams; the other, the way of incarnation whereby the possibilities and virtualities as revealed by imagination are realised in the concrete situation of our lives.¹⁵ The choice is ours, and is founded in a movement of adhesion and of love, in the acceptance of our own finitude and in the will to share this finitude with other human beings. That choice is a matter of charity.

By showing the dire consequences of the refusal to adhere and to love, Bernanos hopes to induce in his reader the necessary spiritual energy to stand up and care. The *horror vacui* is then turned into a quest for plenitude.

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15. The terms *ex-* and *incarnation* are used by Yves Bonnefoy to characterize two opposing attitudes towards the ambiguity of all fictive use of language; incarnation is the decision to assume an image and to realise it in one's own living experience, excarnation corresponds to the decision to put the image, as a imaginary enactment of one's own dreams, in place of real experience. See Yves Bonnefoy (1977, 1981 and 1987).

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