

Georges Bernanos on the paths of Artois

« Chemins du pays d'Artois, à l'extrême automne, fauves et odorants comme des bêtes, sentiers pourrissants sous la pluie de novembre, grandes chevauchées des nuages, rumeurs du ciel, eaux mortes... »

©Catherine Dhérent, mars 2008

Even if Bernanos was too much a city-man to ever really take root in this country, Artois occupies a dominating, unique place, in his works, Artois, country of the childhood, from where he drew the main part of his imaginary world, Artois, key of his internal vision. Nevertheless, this great traveler, having moved more than thirty times, knew more brilliant heavens, in South of France, Majorca, Brazil, and Tunisia.

Often forced into the exile, he always dreamed about this small part of rural and rough France.

His haughty and free character, his long wanderings through the country, on foot or on horseback, shocked the farmers. And nevertheless, he paid a stirring tribute to them in all his novels.

Our walk begins in Aire-sur-la-Lys. Let us park at Saint Pierre square. Just in front of the collegiate church built in the XVIth century which is the biggest and the most beautiful flamboyant church of ancient Spanish Netherlands, his parents on the advice of the priest of Fressin, placed him in October, 1904, in a renowned institution, the Saint - Marie school. They hoped that the teachers would discipline their son who performed poorly in a typical classroom setting.

Behind these high railings and these austere walls, he has to repeat his junior high school year and takes one year of philosophy. He received his diploma (*baccalauréat*) in July, 1906.

He described with cruelty the other pupils coming from Flanders :

« Quant aux élèves, c'est un mélange... Eléments de gens bien élevés venus de tous les coins du Pas-de-Calais, éléments de Flamands qui sont bêtes. Par bonheur, nous sommes deux Parisiens en classe... Et à nous deux, nous remuons ces gros boeufs du Nord, qui suivent éternellement le songe intérieur qu'ils n'achèvent jamais. Oh ! si vous voyiez ces yeux bleus, noyés non pas dans le rêve, mais dans l'inconscience et dans l'indifférence de tout ce qui n'est pas ripaille ! Oh ! Les Flamands !... »

Let us leave the Saint - Marie institution and take Saint Pierre street. We cross a brook that turns the wheel of a mill.

« Connaissez-vous Aire-sur-la-Lys, cher professeur ? ... Non, n'est-ce pas. Une petite ville, presque flamande, avec un canal où sont des eaux sales, sales..., « où les vieux murs sont décalqués Avec des noirs usés d'estampes et d'eaux-fortes » comme dit Rodenbach. »

We have arrived at the city hall square. Almost all the houses were built between 1730 and 1750, in a large-scale architectural project the heart of which is the city hall. The same

pilasters and the Corinthian capitals constitute the main ornament. How fresh are these facades, doubtless even more today after being repainted than a century ago?

« Au demeurant, une villette presque gaie parfois, et parfois aussi mélancolique un tantinet, tout ce qu'il faut pour être originale, quoi !... »

Let us get back on the road and drive to the castle of Equirre the park of which became a camp-ground. Robert Bresson shot here in 1950 the first adaptation of the *Journal d'un curé de campagne* with Claude Laydu in the role of the priest of Ambricourt. The top levels of the castle have disappeared since, in a fire, but the chapel of the lords is still of an elegant sobriety.

After crossing the site of Azincourt cherished by the English people, where we might have a medieval lunch at the restaurant The Charles VI, we arrive in Planques, the name of which means "board" to cross the brook Planquette, simply. This one is named the brook Planquet in the novel *Nouvelle histoire de Mouchette*. The priest of Planques, Anatole Garénaux, was a peaceful and carefree soul. Georges Bernanos and his childhood friend Maxime de Colleville often borrowed from him the small horse they rode through the country.

The nearby village, Fressin, is the key point of the tour. Let us park in front of the ruins of Créquy castle.

Let us go towards the center of the village. At the first corner on the left, are the ancient kennels of the baron Seillière. This fanciful character, great hunter, sold in 1896 to Emile Bernanos, Georges' father, tapestry-maker in Paris, a big house for holidays, the "Château Le Noir" so called because of a former owner. By 1904, the Bernanos family decided to make it their home.

It is at a short distance from here, on the same side of the street, indicated by a railing and a pillar on which was put a plaque in 1953:

« J'habitais au temps de ma jeunesse une vieille chère maison dans les arbres » dans « un minuscule hameau du pays d'Artois, plein de murmure de feuillage et d'eau vive ».

Of this house remain only the railing of the entrance from the street, the bow of the carriage entrance behind trees to the left, a part of the bakery to the right and the dovecote in the yard, these elements surrounding a recently built farm.

The young Bernanos lived here as a young lord, among a laborious, already distrustful towards the foreigners population. His haughty and free character, his long wanderings through the country, the fact that he fired with a rifle at the hens of the farmers, made him an eccentric in their eyes. « In l'applaud : ech grain fou d'Bernanos ».

This melting pot of the Bernanos's world, was the meeting place of all the characters, met or dreamed ... « personnages fabuleux encore à peine formés, embryons sans membres, Mouchette et Donissan, Cénabre, Chantal, et vous, vous seul de mes créatures dont j'ai cru parfois distinguer le visage, mais à qui je n'ai pas osé donner de nom – cher curé d'un Ambricourt imaginaire. »

Here was begun a short time after the armistice of 1918 and almost completely finished the novel *Sous le soleil de Satan*. Bernanos read the manuscript to Vallery-Radot, at the end of a

sunny day, « un de ces jours magnifiques du brûlant été de 1923, à la lisière d'un petit bois tout bourdonnant de lumière et d'abeilles ». Huge success: 6 000 copies sold in one day, 100 000 in six months. Two years later, the Bernanos's parents were obliged to sell the place due to a lack of money.

The door of this big house was always opened to their numerous friends. It was invaded by sometimes unusual objects, a hookah brought back from Turkey, curtains in camel wool, tapestries of Aubusson, hangings of the dining room, books in quantity, everything to render the house « la maison profonde, secrète, sûre ». On the first floor, close to the room of the Bernanos's parents, was a small lounge where Georges often stayed with his mother whom he worshipped.

In the library, Georges at 13 years old discovered Balzac, the great passion of his father who reread all the novels every year.

« De retour à la maison, on s'installait dans la bibliothèque. Et pendant que l'abbé se reposait dans un fauteuil en récitant son bréviaire, Georges, à plat ventre sur un épais tapis, lisait Balzac ».

Behind the house, on the hill, was a park with a variety of trees, with a bower, a kitchen garden, a feed left in care of Clovis, handyman of the house, who became the gardener of the castle in *Journal d'un curé de campagne*.

Walking towards the center of the village, we soon see the church, built by Jean IV lord of Créquy, in 1425. It is one of the best and of the most ancient works of the flamboyant gothic architecture in this area between Artois, Boulonnais and Ponthieu. It is here that the saint of Lumbres officiates in *Sous le soleil de Satan*.

Best is to arrive there at the end of the day, to penetrate as Bernanos did, by the small south door which gives direct access to the bench reserved for the family. The sun flutters then across the picture of the Redemption. Let us sit down in the transept, let us listen to the silence, let us look, let us meditate ... The atmosphere is mystic.

The wood panels around us are of the XVIIIth century. Admire gothic diagonal ribs and sculptured cords to the left at the bottom of the nave and below them, the baptismal fonts of the XVIIIth century, on which were baptized two of the six children of Bernanos, Claude in 1922 and Michel in 1923.

The plaster statue of Joan of Arc is not interesting, except for the fact it was given in 1925 by Georges Bernanos's parents-in-law, the Talbert d' Arc pretending to be descendants of a brother of the saint. It is close to the confessional where the priest of Lumbres in *Sous le soleil de Satan* died.

Let us read again the last pages of this novel, those of the conversion of Saint-Marin, under the features of whom Bernanos doubtless painted the atheistic and sceptic writer Anatole France.

Along the wall, on the narrow « lazy people bench », close to the confessional where the saint attained paradise and peace, in front of the marble plaque, which « humblement... demande de prier pour les Heame... cette famille entièrement éteinte,... la vieille église, attiédie par le jour, respire autour de lui, d'une lente haleine ; une odeur de pierre antique et de bois

vermoulu, aussi secrète que celle de la futaie profonde, glisse au long des piliers trapus, erre en brouillard sur les dalles mal jointes ou s'amasse dans les coins sombres, pareille à une eau dormante. Un renforcement du sol, l'angle d'un mur, une niche vide la recueille comme dans une ornière de granit. Et la lueur rouge de la veilleuse au loin, vers l'autel, ressemble au fanal sur un étang solitaire. »

Let us leave the church and follow the choir to the left. We walk past the abbot Dubois's grave, one of the first readers of *Sous le soleil de Satan*. It is near the young abbot Octave Camier's grave, good friend of the young Bernanos, who died from consumption at the age of 28 and who is the model of the priest of Ambricourt.

We can take then the street which goes up and follow to the left the ruelle du Paradis which dominates the village and passes behind Bernanos's house. It was formerly a muddy path by which Georges escaped towards the countryside and the woods. « Je suis rentré au presbytère par le chemin qu'on appelle, j'ignore pourquoi, chemin de Paradis – un sentier boueux, entre deux haies ».

Let us stop a moment near the ruins of the castle which Jean IV de Créquy had build in the XVth century. It is a romantic ruin hidden in trees. Friend of the great duke of Bourgogne, Philippe le Bon, for whom he was advisor and who loved him tenderly, Jean de Créquy doubtless wished to compete with his suzerain by the construction of this fortress. He wanted it beautiful as that where he was often invited not too far away, in Vieil-Hesdin and which was destroyed by Charles-Quint in the XVIth century. We discover easily both surrounding walls in the deep ditches, the big central quadrangle (77 metres on 56) with eight cylindrical towers (14 metres in diameter and 40 metres high).

Let us leave Fressin and drive to Hesdin by the road of crests. The road ...

« Je n'ai jamais aimé que les routes... Qui n'a pas vu la route à l'aube, entre ses deux rangées d'arbres, toute fraîche, toute vivante, ne sait pas ce que c'est que l'espérance » (*Monsieur Ouine*).

Bernanos used to take this road sloping steeply up to go to Hesdin to rent a horse and ride through the countryside and come back in the evening.

Let us have a look behind us at this country of the plateau, rougher one hundred years ago, at the poor lands cut by greenery and hedges, by steep slopes and hollow paths, a secret country, which is not easy to understand at first glance, so far away from all the major trends.

« Il a poussé plus loin jusqu'à la route de Desvres, à travers les pâturages. Un long moment même, il a suivi d'un œil soupçonneux la frange vaguement lumineuse recouverte peu à peu par la nuit. Elle reparaît plus haut, furtive, traîtresse, pressée de toutes parts, poursuivie de cime en cime par les vertigineuses masses d'ombre sans jamais arrêter ni même ralentir sa fuite oblique... Le village est là, quelque part, enfoui dans ses tilleuls et ses marronniers, avec ses bicoques de briques ou de torchis jetées au hasard, si tristes sous la pluie de décembre » (*Monsieur Ouine*).

Bernanos did not evoke Hesdin in his novels. But we can end the trail admiring the city hall of this little town finished in 1629. From the part advanced on the facade, called the *bretèche*, the orders of the municipality were promulgated. At the top, let us see the statue of Philippe IV, king of Spain, sovereign of Netherlands and Flanders.