

SALVATION BY GRACE : BRESSON'S *UN CONDAMNE A MORT S'EST ECHAPPE*

The film-maker Robert Bresson and Pascal's *Ecrits sur grace*

Does the universe suffer from moral chaos? Or is there an underlying order, possibly divine in origin? Take the question at a material, physical level: is the universe a random series of events from start to finish? Physicists tend to answer this question by seeking pattern and order in the way the universe operates. So with the first question: philosophers, moralists, theologians are inclined to find pattern and order (or lack of it) in the way we behave.

Such patterns are easier to discern and understand when humans are at peace than at war. The period 1940 to 1944 is known in France as *les annees noires*: occupation by the Nazis made moral chaos visible, dividing communities and families. You could be for Petain, you could be for Resistance. You could be for Fascism, you could be for sullen collaboration. You could be for clear individual choice, you could be for collective cowardice. You could be open to the grace of God, you could be indifferent.

To illustrate this chaos of moral uncertainty, of free will hampered by fear, by blindness, by ideology, Robert Bresson, a decade after the end of the war, chose to film the story of one man's single act of escape from prison. It is documentary in tone, 'This story is true. I give it unadorned' (as Bresson claims in the opening title), and recounts the successful sequence of actions taken by Andre Devigny to escape from Montluc Prison in Lyons where he had been placed in April 1943 ¹. Bresson's corpus of films reveals a deep preoccupation with the themes of human sin and salvation from *Les Anges du peche* (1943), set in a Dominican convent, to *L'Argent* (1982) which explores the deeply disordering effect on humans of the pursuit of

money. His Catholic credentials are most fully on display in his faithful version of Bernanos' *Diary of a Country Priest* (1950), but his gift for unfolding religious concerns in incidents that seem at first sight far removed from them is particularly on display in *Un Condamne*. He had read Devigny's account in *Le Figaro Litteraire* for 20th November 1954 and fashioned from it a film both true to documentary detail yet, picking up details in Devigny's narrative, underpinning it with a theological view. For from the facts of the escape Bresson conjures a picture of a universe in which a guiding purpose oversees human actions, not just Devigny's, but also those of his fellow *resistants* in the prison, and in so doing makes us engage with the story in the same way.

The film takes an exceptional situation, remote from the comfort of post-war affluence, and poses a profound question that is common to all individuals: why do things happen to us? The escape from Montluc of Fontaine (as Devigny is called in the film) succeeds by virtue of a series of incremental steps, and thus offers a variety of answers both to the question and also how humans achieve the apparently impossible. Does Fontaine succeed ultimately as a result of exercising his will? He is conscious of particular decisions intended by him, such as to make a rope, but he is too ignorant of his situation – of the layout of the prison and its operation – to will with perfect clarity how he should use it. Is it a result of incremental decisions? When he is put in his second cell, his sole plan is to make an opening in the door, and only then to consider his next step. Is it a result of luck? Just when he needs one as a tool, a spoon presents itself. Is it a result of courage, a conscious will to fortitude? He tells himself that he is engaged in a fight 'against the walls'. Is it a result of faith? The pastor gives him Bible passages to read; he accepts them. Is it the result of the failure of others? He tries to enlist Orsini in his escape attempt, but Orsini has his

own plan in the execution of which he is caught and then shot, prompting the comment from one of Fontaine's fellow-prisoners, 'Orsini died that you might succeed.' Is it the result of some omnipotent beneficent hand? When the coats in the washroom are searched, the guards omit to look through the pockets of the pastor's, one of which contains a slip of paper with Fontaine's escape plan written down for others to use. Is it the result of resolve? After the painstaking preparations, he decides: 'Tomorrow it must be.' Is it the result of an accident that looks fatal but turns out beneficial? Just as he is near to being ready, a young Frenchman called Jost, a deserter from the Legion des Volontaires Francais, the 'volunteer' body raised by the Germans from among the French, is put in his cell, throwing all his plans awry. Although aware that he might be a spy, Fontaine decides to take Jost with him and during the course of the escape comes to realize that without him he would have been unable to scale a particular wall: with two people it is possible.

So, there are many ways to success. Fontaine fights inertia, but he only succeeds as result of things happening over which he has no control. He is aided by chance: hauled off to the Hotel Terminus where he is told he will be shot, he returns to Montluc in trepidation that he will be put in a different cell and thus lose all his escape gear. By chance he is put back in his former one to be reunited with the objects necessary for his plan.

If inertia and chance play their part, does fate as well? The successful outcome of the sequence of incidents is escape, yet this does not occur by some preordained destiny. Rather, Bresson sees it as the grace of God. His original title for the film was *Aide-toi*. . . , the first half of the saying *Aide-toi, le ciel t'aidera* ('Heaven helps him who helps himself'). Bresson's theology here echoes the writings of the man whom he considered as 'for everyone'²: Blaise Pascal, whose *Ecrits sur grace*

offers a discussion of grace which wonderfully chimes in with Bresson's moral universe as it is expounded in *Un Condamne*. Pascal poses the question of whether God has an 'absolute will' to save some and damn others, or, in submitting to the free will of man the use of his grace, has He foreseen the way in which a person will exert his will to use God's grace, either for their own salvation or damnation? Pascal outlines three answers, the first two of which he regards as wrong, and the third as right.

- 1) Followers of Calvin say that God created man without predicting his desserts. But after Adam's sin and fall, God sent Jesus to redeem those he wished to save and to grant them salvation, at the same time depriving of grace all those he wished to damn. Pascal's verdict is that this is *insupportable*.
- 2) The next answer is that of the Molinists, followers of the ideas of Luis de Molina (1535-1600), who say that God has a conditional will to save all men. His son was incarnate to redeem all, his grace being given to all. It then is purely a matter of human will whether a good or bad use is made of this grace. Pascal rejects this view because it excludes God: good and evil are solely the result of human will.
- 3) For the third and in his view the right answer he turns to the followers of Augustine. For them, there are two states of human nature: first in the newly created Adam, without sin; the second reduced by the Fall to a state of sin. At this point God could if he had so willed have justly damned all mankind. However, in an act of mercy He has willed to save a part of mankind, and sent his son Jesus in order to do so. The rest could join the elect if they persevered in seeking redemption, but

they lack the efficacious grace without which they do not will their own salvation. There are three types of person: those who never come to faith, for God never intended that they should receive grace; secondly, the faithful who persevere in grace, brought to salvation by God's will; in between comes a third type: those who come to faith but who, failing to persevere, run the risk of dying in mortal sin. Jesus wanted to redeem this class of humanity by giving them the graces leading to salvation, but not the singular grace of perseverance. The conclusion of the Augustinian position is that God wills absolutely to save some people, and wills conditionally to damn others; that salvation comes from the will of God and damnation from the will of man.

While Pascal's concentrated argument makes his *Ecrits* difficult to understand theologically, it is one of the attributes of Bresson's film that it manages to illuminate these texts in striking manner. For Fontaine, arrested and condemned, has in effect been willed by others to damnation, and escapes by virtue of exercising his own will aided by God's grace. Fontaine's escape is therefore a metaphor for human salvation, just as the austere confines of Montluc prison are a metaphor for the universe. It is important to understand that Bresson does not seek to create a rigid parallel between Pascal's interpretation of Augustine and the situation in Montluc. Pascal's theology proposes a class of person who never comes to faith, and Bresson might have been tempted to depict Fontaine's Gestapo captors in this light. In fact, both German soldiers and French collaborators are reduced to walk-on parts in the main drama conducted by the prisoners. When Fontaine, confronted by a German soldier during the course of his escape, has to dispose of him in order to be able to continue, Bresson

minimizes the impact of this act by having the murder take place behind a wall out of our vision, so that our attention is focussed solely on Fontaine and the question of whether he will succeed.

With a knowledge of what Pascal is saying, we can sense Bresson's adoption of the Augustinian position and an implicit rejection of the Calvinist and Molinist ones. The former would be insupportable because it would suppose that the fate of each of the prisoners in Montluc had already been determined and that human free will was irrelevant: the film is emphatic about showing the courses of action humans can will for themselves. Nor is the Molinist position – that God's grace has been given to all to make good or bad use of it – adequate. Bresson has interpreted Devigny's account as revealing the hand of God at key points, e.g. the search of the jacket pockets, when the incriminating piece of paper is passed over, or that Blanchet is moved to change his view of what Fontaine is doing, or that Jost arrives in his cell just as he is about to execute his escape plan, or simply the miracle of an imprisoned pastor acquiring a Bible. In Bresson's account, God intervenes to change human actions or their results, and does not leave salvation to human will alone.

So, for Augustinians, Fontaine's escape is the result of the divine and human will working together. It is Fontaine who decides to make an opening in the prison door, to reach the skylight, to take Jost with him, to make the final crossing from the inner to the outer wall, and thence to freedom. But in doing so, he aids the will of God who in his omniscience knows the layout of the prison, what is possible and what is not, that Jost is necessary to completing the escape, and that Fontaine will succeed, provided he helps himself.

Particularly revealing of Bresson's metaphysics are the four 'theological conversations' that take place between Fontaine and the other prisoners. The film is

made with such rigour that each gesture, each noise, each look has significance. This is equally true of the dialogue, exact and spare by Bresson's choice but also because talking between prisoners is forbidden, so every word is clandestine but pregnant. These exchanges all take place in the washroom where Fontaine befriends a Protestant pastor who encourages him to pray, adding 'God will save you'.

Fontaine He will save us if we help ourselves

Pastor Do you never pray?

F Sometimes

P When things go badly

F Yes

P How convenient

F Too convenient. It is too convenient if God does everything.

Here Fontaine explicitly rejects the Calvinist view of grace.

The second conversation occurs just after Orsini's failed attempt to escape, and explains why the subtitle of *Un Condamne* is *Le vent souffle ou il veut* (in the King James version 'The wind bloweth where it listeth', 'The wind blows where it wills' in modern versions).

Pastor (to Fontaine) Don't blame yourself; he couldn't wait.

Fontaine Why? Despair?

P Too hopeful for a new life. Perhaps that's what Christ meant, 'You must be born again'. [P hands F a piece of paper.] I've copied it for you. [P is referring to John c.3 v.3, which he has copied for F from his Bible³.]

Fontaine then returns to his cell to read it. The conversation is continued at the cell window with his neighbour, Blanchet.

F Nicodemus said, 'How can a man be born when he is old?'
 Jesus answered, 'The wind blows where it wills. You must be born again.'
 Are you listening?

Blanchet I am listening

[Sound of machine gun]

F It's him [ie Orsini]

B I'm sure

F I think it is. . . one can't be sure of anything here.

The third conversation occurs just after Fontaine has spoken to a newly-arrived Catholic priest and warmly commends him to his cellmate, the pastor. The pastor says to one of the prisoners, Hebrard, that it is necessary to warn Fontaine, that he should go now before it is too late. Hebrard comments, 'What must be must be; we cannot go against fate.'

Pastor He can

Hebrard So he says.

P Three months weaken you

The fourth conversation picks up this third one:

Hebrard No, you're stronger. It's a gift of grace.

P Or a trap. [To F] Can you really leave?

F I'm ready

P Well, don't wait too long.

The common thread to these conversations is what can or should Fontaine do to motivate himself: is his will determining his actions, or God's? The key passage is the reference to Jesus' words from John's Gospel, 'The wind blows where it wills', which Bresson uses as a sub-title to the film. 'Wind' translates Greek *pneuma*,

'breath' or 'spirit'. The plain use of the word 'wind' seems to make Jesus' words describe the arbitrary nature of the world, but when it is understood that the idea includes the spirit of God, the reference is then to the mystery of the will of God moving beyond human comprehension. Fontaine's salvation is the result of his own willing to be saved, but it is only achieved by the primary will of God. (In the first *Ecrit sur grace* Pascal develops an idea of a primary and a secondary will. "Those who are saved willed to be so, and God has likewise willed it . . . He cannot save us without our aid . . . It is obvious that the will of God and the will of man combine for the salvation . . . of those who are saved.")

Bresson is at pains to indicate that the film is about the salvation of other prisoners beside Fontaine. Orsini's death by firing squad (if it is Orsini: see above for the conversation between Fontaine and Blanchet – a grace note of doubt) is preceded by the words spoken by Fontaine to Blanchet, 'You must be born again'. Bresson hints that Orsini's death is a release from suffering to a new life. Secondly, Blanchet himself travels from resentment at Fontaine that his scraping at the door will get all the prisoners punished, to active encouragement that he will succeed. In their final conversation, Fontaine remarks to him, 'We'll meet again.'

B In another life perhaps

F In this life. You must have faith

B Have faith in your hooks, don't doubt yourself.

In this brief exchange, the prisoners refer to the human need for faith – faith in oneself, faith in the tools one makes (the hooks referred to are those Fontaine has fashioned from the frame of his *lanterne* and which are crucial to scaling the walls), and faith in an afterlife.

Beside that of Fontaine, Orsini and Blanchet, there is a rebirth attained by the pastor. All his life he has dreamt of being alone with his Bible. In the prison one turns up, which provokes the comment from him, *C'est un chance, un miracle*, linking the accidental to the miraculous, ie the hand of God.

Bresson is justly famous for the concentration of his style. He strips away irrelevancies: facial expressions, gestures, words, music, the passage of time, in order to focus the viewer's eye, ear and mind on the particular dramatic significance of the story he is telling. This process of reduction is an assertion of creative will: each bodily movement, each word, each camera shot has a deliberate place in the whole, each making up and enhancing the whole. Indeed the prison makes the perfect setting for a particular aesthetic strategy of Bresson's, namely to direct the spectator to listen as much as to look. For in prison (see also Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*), it is not what you see but what you hear that has importance. Bresson therefore tells his story as much on the soundtrack as with the camera.

For a French *resistant* audience, no incident would sum up the atmosphere of that time better than the reference to the Hotel Terminus, headquarters to the Gestapo and to Klaus Barbie, the 'butcher of Lyons'. The temptation for the film-maker is to dwell on the building in all its sinister grandeur, its long corridors, its chilly atmosphere. Instead Bresson has two shots lasting 50 seconds. The first is simply of the name 'Hotel Terminus' over a door. We see the top half of the door opening and closing and hear the sound of a vehicle departing. The ear being more creative than the eye, our imagination is left to consider the significance for a French *resistant* of entering this building. The second shot shows Fontaine before a desk. We only see the back of Fontaine's antagonist⁴, merely hear his words as we gaze at Fontaine's face: "The investigation into your case is complete, Lieutenant Fontaine. Death is the

penalty for spying and sabotage. You will be shot.” This brief sequence epitomizes the moral chaos in which Fontaine, aided by the grace of God, struggles to assert his own will, and triumphs.

Tim Cawkwell

1 *Un Condamne a mort s'est echappe* was made in 1956. The creation of a film is an act of collaboration, so besides Bresson's direction and screenplay it is worth mentioning L H Burel's photography and Pierre Charbonnier's art direction: the sets and the grey patina of the images wonderfully recreate the prison. Bresson is famous for using unknowns to play the roles in his films. Devigny/Fontaine is played by Francois Leterrier. The film is 98 minutes long and is available on video from Artificial Eye.

The story was published in book form by Gallimard in 1956 under the title *Un condamne a mort s'est echappe* and in English in 1957 as *Escape from Montluc*, now out of print.

2 In a celebrated interview between Bresson, the film-maker Jean-Luc Godard and the critic Michel Delahaye, published in *Cahiers du Cinema* in May 1966, the following exchange occurs: Delahaye says, 'Let's come back to Jansenism. Do you not think . . . that your view of the world fits perfectly with the Jansenist one, especially about Evil? In your mind the world seems condemned.' Godard interjects: 'Exactly. Pascal is an "Inquisitor" . . .' Bresson responds: 'You know, Pascal is particularly important for me, but then he is important for

everyone. Yet with Jansenism there is something of this kind, which I have the impression I share, that our life is shaped at one and the same time by predestination . . . and by chance.' They are talking about his 1965 film *Au Hasard Balthazar*, but the words apply equally to *Un Condamne*.

3 In Devigny's account, the passage copied out by the pastor is from Luke 11.1-10: 'Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened.'

4 Devigny tells us that this was in fact the Gestapo chief, Klaus Barbie.