

THE ARCHBISHOP, THE CRIMINAL AND THE REPAIR OF DESTINIES

© Tim Cawkwell 2010

Abstract: This article explores the idea of confession as it is analysed in Rowan Williams' recent book on Dostoevsky's novels. Bernanos made a Dostoevskian confessional scene central to 'The Diary of a Country Priest', realized in Bresson's film of the novel. The link between Dostoevsky and Bresson is then explored, especially the re-creation of Porfiry Petrovich in 'Crime and Punishment' as a Parisian police inspector. This leads to Inspector Vigot in Greene's 'The Quiet American' and to Simenon's Inspector Maigret who at the beginning of his career had a vision of himself as a 'repairer of destinies' or confessor.

'The exchange of crosses' is the title of a highly suggestive chapter in the Archbishop of Canterbury's remarkable book on Dostoevsky,¹ published in 2008. In it he explores a crucial idea in Dostoevsky's big novels, that to hear a confession is to take on another person's responsibilities, an idea that features in at least three major points in his writing: the most extended account is in 'Crime and Punishment', which traces Raskolnikov's agony following the two murders he has committed: the spilling of the beans to the Inspector and to Sonya is, in the case of the former, a resolution of the cat-and-mouse game between the Inspector and Raskolnikov, and in Sonya's case part of a love story that redeems the murderer. The second is in 'The Devils' where Nikolai Stavrogin makes an important confession to Father Tikhon in a chapter that was suppressed from the version published in 'The Russian Messenger'.² Perhaps because it was suppressed, Dostoevsky repeats a similarly dramatic incident of confession in book 6 of the subsequent 'The Brothers Karamazov' where a milestone on Zinovy's path to the monastery (where he becomes Father Zossima) is marked in particular by his encounter with the 'mysterious visitor'.

What is being confessed in all three cases is a crime, and a crime of the most heinous kind: a *crime passionelle* of murder in the case of the mysterious visitor; two murders in the case of Raskolnikov; and perhaps most unsettling of all the sexual abuse of a young girl by Stavrogin which causes her to hang herself. Dostoevsky is the strongest meat, but these extreme incidents are part of what makes him so compelling, and the vividness and depth of their treatment also contributes to what has made him so influential.

One of the writers to have fallen under his spell is the French Catholic, Georges Bernanos (1888-1948), a novelist and essayist with a heightened sense of the crucifying but redeeming nature of the Christian life.³ His most important novel is 'Le Journal d'un curé de campagne', published in 1936, which won Le Grand Prix du Roman de l'Académie Française, and which enjoyed even greater success than his first novel, 'Sous le soleil de Satan' (1926). Bernanos' career is a complicated one. A convinced monarchist in the early part of his life, he was for a time associated with right-wing movements represented by Les Camelots du Roi and L'Action Française. After fighting in and surviving the First World War, he felt a vocation to be a writer and with success as a novelist began to have a voice in French cultural life. Initially a supporter of Franco in the Spanish Civil War, he was scandalised by Franco's repression of Republicans and the position taken by some of the Spanish clergy. Having moved to Brazil in 1938, when war broke out in Europe he became a Gaullist and wrote extensively for Free French publications, returning to France in 1945 in answer to De Gaulle's summons expressed in a telegram: 'Your place is among us.' Soon after his death in 1948, his reputation was further enhanced by the film version of 'Le Journal' by Robert Bresson, extraordinary for its fidelity to the book which

Bresson achieved first by refining the narrative to its essentials and then using a compressed style to put it on screen.⁴

Central to both the book and the film is the scene in the big house where the young priest (who is never named) goes to talk to the countess about the service that she celebrates every six months in honour of the dead in her family. This turns out to be only a pretext, for he blurts out, "I came to talk about your daughter." Life in the big house is dysfunctional: the count is flirting with the young governess tutoring his daughter, Chantal, who as a result detests the governess and has no respect for her father; her mother she regards as an 'imbecile and a coward'⁵ because she puts up with it. Darkening the countess's world is a depressive obsession with her young son who had died 11 years previously at the age of 18 months. As a result she turns her back on the count's infidelities and is blind to her daughter's appeals for help which she has disguised as rebellion.

In this big scene it is priestly innocence that leads the countess to confess her denial of God, the fact that the death of her little boy weighs upon her so much that she cannot relieve the burden: she feels that God has broken her. In a long dialogue, the priest leads her to an acceptance of God's will, bringing her to a state of grace at the end before leaving the house. The countess then sends him a private letter about the peace he has given her, and in the night passes away. This is when the priest, already unpopular in the parish, finds that he has 'taken responsibility' for her state of sin and experiences his real crucifixion. Bound to the silence of the confession he refuses to defend himself against the accusation that he is somehow responsible for her death. This episode is key to the self-knowledge he has come to, and is the zenith of the book: the first half leads up to it, and the events following, leading to his death pronouncing that all is grace, flow from it.

The pattern for the encounter between the priest and countess is closely modelled on the meeting between Zinovy and the mysterious visitor in 'The Brothers Karamazov'. He comes to Zinovy attracted by the story going the rounds of how at a duel he had thrown away his pistol rather than go through with it, contrary to all convention but motivated by the illumination he had received of the need for repentance following his mistreatment of his servant, Afanasy. Once the visitor has got to know Zinovy and to trust him, one evening he tells him about the murder he committed long before and for which he has never been found out. He follows up this private confession by a public announcement of the crime at his birthday party, an announcement which Zinovy had urged him to make, only to find out that no one believes him. When like the countess in 'Le Journal' he then falls ill and dies a week later, Zinovy – like the priest – is in effect blamed for his death, for having changed him. As a result, Zinovy is largely shunned, and soon after he enters the monastery.

In comparing the two scenes, I believe that Bernanos makes a direct quotation from Dostoevsky, for when the priest says to the countess in 'Le Journal', "Hell is to be no longer capable of love", he is surely quoting Zossima's discourse on hell in 'Karamazov': "I am thinking, 'What is hell?' and I am reasoning thus: 'The suffering that comes from the consciousness that one is no longer able to love.'"⁶ More than this the dramatic ideas in both passages are very close. Firstly, while Zinovy is experienced and the priest inexperienced, they share an unworldliness from their priestly/monkish role, that is "without vanity, without ambition", as the countess says of the priest. Secondly, dialogue between confessor and penitent is crucial: the confessor has to learn not just to speak and not just to listen, but to elicit self-disclosure.⁷ In 'Karamazov', the visitor talks regularly to Zinovy for a month with him before revealing his crime; in 'Le Journal' priest and countess spar with each other as if they were on a stage. Dialogue in both cases leads the confessor to urge expiation by self-abasement, that the countess should throw herself at Chantal's feet (a very Dostoevskian act) and that the visitor should confess in public, which he does at his birthday party. Thirdly, both Zinovy and the

priest observe a vow of silence on what they have been privy to, yet it is more than a priestly vow but part of their taking responsibility for the sin of the world of which they are a part -- because they are a part they are therefore culpable. Finally, the priest has a motto applicable to both: *faire face* / 'face up to things', especially God. For both the act is incomprehensibly dangerous, but it is part of the necessary mediation between God and the world of sin.

In engaging with Bernanos' novel so faithfully, Robert Bresson inevitably connects himself to Dostoevsky, a connection which was to become a vital one for his career: two films were made directly from Dostoevsky short stories: *Une Femme Douce* (1969) from 'A Gentle Creature' and *Quatre Nuits d'un rêveur* (1972) from 'White Nights'. In addition, *Le Diable probablement* (1977) -- 'the devil probably' -- derives its title from Ivan's facetious reply to his father in 'The Brothers Karamazov' when Ivan insists that there is no God and his father asks, "Who is laughing at mankind, Ivan?"⁸ The story of *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966) about the life of a donkey was said by Bresson to have been illuminated by his reading the passage in 'The Idiot' about a braying donkey.⁹ Most important of all is the fact that *Pickpocket* (1959) is a version of 'Crime and Punishment', not immediately apparent on first viewing because the relocation of the setting from Saint Petersburg to Paris and the reincarnation of the murderer Raskolnikov as the petty criminal Michel disguises what has happened. Bresson prefaces the film with the statement "This film is not a detective story,"¹⁰ for like Dostoevsky's novel it is so much more than that -- although both novel and film at the simplest level are just that. The trajectory of *Pickpocket* is very close to the book: i) Michel's theory of 'superior persons' closely echoes Raskolnikov's theory about Napoleons being held back by society; ii) Raskolnikov's friend Razumikhin is metamorphosed into Michel's friend Jacques, whose character is loyal, sympathetic and kind, but uncomprehending of Raskolnikov's/Michel's criminal desires; iii) Sonya becomes Jeanne who does not abandon Michel and becomes his salvific angel in prison -- like 'Crime and Punishment', *Pickpocket* turns out in the end to be a story about love; iv) cleverest of all is the reincarnation of the Police Inspector Porfiry Petrovich as the traditional French Police Inspector in *Pickpocket* -- with shades of Simenon's Maigret as we shall see below. In both Dostoevsky's novel and Bresson's film, the Inspector is shrewd enough to see that Raskolnikov/Michel is more than he seems, and that persistence in watching him will lead eventually to his confession of guilt.

There is a difference too because in Dostoevsky's almost stream-of-consciousness novel, Raskolnikov is tortured by a desire to make a clean breast of it which he eventually does to Sonya and to his sister Avdotya before going to the police station in order to do so. Bresson's Michel is much more opaque, the interiority of the novel pared down by the impenetrable exteriors of the cinema¹¹: in the book we do not see Raskolnikov's face but we do read his thoughts; in the cinema it is much more the other way round. In *Pickpocket* therefore the agency of salvation is not so much a coming to internal repentance but a mysterious operation of external grace, not so much the dialogic exchange of speaking and listening about which Williams is so eloquent¹² as the oppressive denial of will that criminality gives Michel (so that being tricked by the police into arrest feels inevitable), and then the mysterious realisation by Michel that he needs Jeanne who has waited patiently for him to come to her: his escape from hell is in finding a capacity to love.

In the process of the story of detection, however, Dostoevsky's Porfiry and Bresson's Inspector do mirror each other, and intriguingly they connect to the confessor's role so eloquently imagined in Dostoevsky's Zinovy and in Bernanos' priest. In all four cases, the role of the recipient of secrets is to practice patience in letting the 'victim' confess their guilt. In Zinovy and the priest's case, the situation then complicates itself by

obliging the confessor to take on the burden of the sins confessed. No such difficulty afflicts the two police inspectors, who have got their perpetrators behind bars and move onto the next case -- absolution and redemption are for others to hand out.

The detective story has become a staple feature of contemporary fiction. While there are other sources for this than Dostoevsky, the influence of 'Crime and Punishment' has been enormous, as if the narrative of the inspector-criminal relationship was destined to be a major strand of popular fiction. For example, the idea of a crossover between the priestly role and the inspector's role crops up in the work of two very accomplished writers, Graham Greene and Georges Simenon, both capable of 'entertainments' as well as serious fiction.

In Greene's 'The Quiet American', set in French-ruled Vietnam, the murder of the American of the title, Alden Pyle, necessitates Fowler, the British war correspondent, being brought into the Sûreté for questioning, prompting him to reflect to himself: "French methods are a little old-fashioned by our cold standards: they believe in the conscience, the sense of guilt, a criminal should be confronted with his crime, for he may break down and betray himself." When Fowler arrives, he finds Inspector Vigot reading – not Dostoevsky or Bernanos but Pascal. This prompts a conversation as follows, in which Fowler teases Vigot that he should have been a priest:

Fowler: "What made you into a policeman, Vigot?"

Vigot: "There were a number of factors. The need to earn a living, a curiosity about people, and – yes, even that, a love of Gaboriau."¹³

Fowler: "Perhaps you ought to have been a priest."

Vigot: "I didn't read the right authors for that – in those days."¹⁴

Greene was an admirer of Bernanos, as is made clear by an essay he wrote in 1968 entitled 'Bernanos, the Beginner'¹⁵. As a professional novelist himself, he dissects some of the faults he discerns in Bernanos' first novel, 'Sous le soleil de Satan', but then puts them aside in praise of his authenticity, "as though Bernanos were a biographer rather than a novelist", as if by breaking the rules of novel-writing Bernanos only reinforces the truth of what he is saying. 'Le Journal', his sixth novel, may be more assured than his first as a fictional composition, but it still is written in order to embody the essential reality of the world as Bernanos saw it.

Police stations and suspects are natural home territory in Simenon's Maigret novels. Two years before the publication of 'The Quiet American', Simenon's 'La Première Enquête de Maigret' had appeared. Simenon uses his 75 Maigret novels to give a complete portrait of his inspector, turning him in the process into a heroic archetype. In an early novel, 'L'Affaire St-Fiacre' published in 1931, we learn that Maigret's pre-war childhood was a properly catholic one: he had served as a choirboy in his local church; he had been to confession.¹⁶ Might he have become a priest? No, as it turned out. By the time of 'La Première Enquête' published over 20 years after the first Maigret and many cases later, Simenon tells us that he studied to be a doctor but his studies had been cut short by the death of his father; only then had he become a policeman. But Simenon goes behind these surface facts to give a deeper account: Jules Maigret wanted to practise a profession that did not exist, "doctor and priest at once . . . who would at first glance understand the destinies of others". Because his intelligence would allow him to put himself inside everybody's mind, he would have been a 'repairer of destinies'.¹⁷ Maigret asks himself: "And are not policemen actually repairers of destinies sometimes?" His method is patient but insistent, sizing up each suspect, asking the searching question, in the end pointing the finger, all as part of the 'cat-and-mouse game' the inspector plays with the criminal. Sometimes the perpetrator unburdens him or herself

in a longing to share the responsibility. And it is very possible that this idea derives from Simenon's early encounter with Porfiry Petrovich in 'Crime and Punishment'. As a teenager, his parents in Liège had taken in lodgers in order to make ends meet. These lodgers had come mostly from eastern Europe and from Russia, and despite the difficulties that running a boarding-house imposed on the Simenons' daily domestic life, Simenon in his memoirs acknowledged their influence on him because they had introduced him to the great Russian authors including Dostoevsky.¹⁸

So it is Dostoevsky who sets this literary thread in train, with his devastating confrontations between criminal and 'confessor' -- a police inspector in 'Crime and Punishment', an actual monk in 'The Devils', and a would-be monk in 'The Brothers Karamazov'. It is his psychological acuity understood in religious terms that enthuses Bernanos and therefore Bresson, and it is in the penumbra of Dostoevsky that Greene and Simenon operate. We are in debt to the Archbishop of Canterbury for taking us back to the source of these potent ideas.

Tim Cawkwell is a freelance writer on the cinema (www.timcawkwell.co.uk), and author of 'The Filmgoer's Guide to God'.

ENDNOTES

- 1 'Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction' by Rowan Williams (London: Continuum 2008).
- 2 'The Devils' was first published in serial form in 'The Russian Messenger' in 1870-1, but the editor refused to publish 'Stavrogin's Confession', nor did it appear in the first edition of 1871. It was discovered in 1921 and first published separately in 1922. It is included in the Penguin Classics edition (London: Penguin Books 1971).
- 3 Robert Vallery-Radot, editor of 'L'Univers' in 1919, when he first met Bernanos said that his 'masters' were Balzac, Bloy, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Dostoevsky and Conrad. (See the biography by Michel Estève in the Gallimard NRF edition of Bernanos' 'Oeuvres Romanesques' 1961, page 1.)
- 4 Bresson also filmed Bernanos' 'Nouvelle Histoire de Mouchette' as *Mouchette*. Bresson's films, including *Le Journal d'un curé de campagne*, are more fully discussed in my 'Filmgoer's Guide to God' (London: Darton Longman Todd 2004). One chapter ('Guilty as Sin') is devoted to the chain of Dostoevsky's 'Crime and Punishment', Bresson's *Pickpocket* and Paul Schrader's *American Gigolo*.
- 5 Bernanos' 'Oeuvres Romanesques' (Paris: Gallimard 1961), page 1134.
- 6 Bernanos' 'Oeuvres Romanesques', page 1157, and the Penguin Classics edition of 'The Brothers Karamazov' (London: Penguin Books 1982), page 379 (part 2, book 6, chapter 3, section f). The association of hell with loss of love, found in the teaching of Tikhon of Zadonsk (18th century), has a root in the theology of Isaac the Syrian (8th century). See Williams, 'Dostoevsky', page 204.
- 7 See Williams, 'Dostoevsky', pages 171-5.
- 8 See 'The Brothers Karamazov' in the Penguin Classics edition (London: Penguin Books 1982), page 156 (part 1, book 3, chapter 8).
- 9 Bresson had already thought of a film about a donkey when he re-read 'The Idiot' and Myshkin's reaction (part 1, chapter 5) to hearing an ass braying in the market: "It greatly took my fancy for some reason, and at the same time my head seemed to clear suddenly." See the interview with Bresson in 'Cahiers du Cinéma' no. 178, May 1966.
- 10 "Ce film n'est pas du style policier."

- 11 As he had done with the priest in *Le Journal*, Bresson shows Michel keeping a diary as a way of making his thought visible as writing or as voice-over. But less use is made of this device than in the earlier film, giving more emphasis to Michel's face.
- 12 See note 7 above.
- 13 Émile Gaboriau (1832-73) is the father of the French *policier*. His *commissaire* is Lecoq. The stories were published from 1861 on, prompting the question whether Dostoevsky had read any before he wrote 'Crime and Punishment' (1865-6).
- 14 'The Quiet American' (London: Heinemann 1955), pages 18 and 137 of the Penguin edition (London: Penguin Books 1962).
- 15 See 'Collected Essays' (London: Bodley Head 1969 and London: Penguin Books 1970).
- 16 'L'Affaire St-Fiacre' (1931) published in Britain as 'Maigret Goes Home' (London: Penguin Books 1967). See page 81 of the Penguin edition.
- 17 'La Première Enquête de Maigret' (1953) published in Britain as 'Maigret's First Case' (London: Penguin Books 1962). See pages 80-1.
- 18 See pages 10-11 of 'Simenon: a biography' by Pierre Assouline (London: Chatto and Windus 1997).