

IN THE WORDS OF THE BISHOP OF MEAUX – JULIEN GREEN
ON BOSSUET

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Julien Green's *Journal* abounds in precise, regularly noted references to his vast reading. Certain dominant trends can be noted in his choice of books. His choice favours titles which have spiritual themes, Anglo-Saxon literature, poetry, books on art and autobiographical writings. In the domain of spiritual literature he reveals a particular affinity with Port-Royal and Pascal. While this affinity with the seventeenth century is well known, Green's reading of Bossuet has been largely ignored. As this year marks the tercentenary of Bossuet's death, it may be of interest to explore his comments on his readings of the Bishop of Meaux. We will concentrate on certain themes which have an appeal for Green, but we will note above all his comments on the tone and style in which they are rendered.

One of the dominant preoccupations of Green's life and works is that of death. His revelatory experience of his mortality at the age of twenty is described in the third volume of his autobiography, *Terre Lointaine*.¹ The setting, his uncle's orchard, and the description of his becoming aware of his mortality as he is about to taste the fruit of the orchard confer the dimension of a Biblical myth on the narrative. This

scene frequently recurs in transposed form in Green's fiction and is also the subject of comment in his *Journal*. In his most important comment on this experience Green relies on a quotation from Bossuet to explain that up to then he knew that he would die but did not believe it. (Cf. OC, IV, p. 619). Some years later he refers to a passage from the *Sermon sur l'endurcissement* to the effect that death is everywhere, in the food we eat, the air we breathe, even in cures for illness. This passage has a strangely modern ring for Green, but he adds that its style is superior to any modern description (Cf. OC, V, p. 312). Green's admiration of Bossuet's style led him to write out passages from his sermons. Towards the end of his life, in 1995, we find him making a copy of a lengthy passage from the *Sermon pour le quatrième jour de Pâques 1681*, the theme of which is death. For Green the passage has 'l'allure d'une perfection monumentale' in the alternate use of the verbs *marcher* and *arrêter* to indicate man's fear in his journey towards the abyss and in the use of water and flower images to reflect the transitory, diversionary and falsifying nature of human pleasure.ⁱⁱ

Another profound personal preoccupation of Green's characters is that of the *néant* which is at the core of human existence. When asked about the importance of this question for him by Roger Vrigny in

December 1967, Green replies by quoting Bossuet's *Dissertation sur l'honneur* to the effect that it is 'l'ennui, qui seul suffirait à rendre la vie insupportable' (OC, V, p. 450). He goes on to explain that what he often experiences is the *ennui* with all the connotations of *neurasthénie* which the seventeenth century conferred on it. He further describes it as an 'affreuse tristesse' from which one can only be rescued by grace (OC. V, p. 450). This theme is closely woven into the fabric of the structure of Green's novels.ⁱⁱⁱ

Not surprisingly Green's attention is drawn towards what Bossuet has to say about carnal love and chastity. In April 1938 we find him discussing Bossuet's *Sermon pour le jour de Pâques, 1660*, the theme of which is chastity, with Gide (OC, IV, p. 463). He does not, however, elaborate on the content of this discussion. Some fourteen years later he reflects on Bossuet's *Sermon pour le troisième Dimanche de Carême*, the theme of which is 'l'amour des plaisirs' which, in turn, is linked to the theme of death. Bossuet talks of the fear that, at the moment of death, we may experience a nostalgia for, or attachment to the pleasures of the past. This is an issue which is raised from time to time by some of Green's characters. The theme of sexuality and its links with sin and death is central to Green's fiction.

Green's focus on the themes of death, *le néant* and carnal pleasure is interesting in that it reveals his own preoccupations as a person and writer. The focus on these themes bears out Chateaubriand's dictum that 'on ne peint bien que son propre coeur en l'attribuant à un autre'.^{iv} It also illustrates what André Maurois says of the twentieth-century readers i.e. that they try to find in books 'des frères d'inquiétude'.^v The choice of author or aspects of an author's work responds to a profound sense of questioning in the reader's being.

Green also shows an interest in Bossuet's response to Mme Guyon's advocacy of *quiétisme* in *Maximes des Saints*. However, he expresses reservations in regard to the Bossuet of *Relation sur le quiétisme*, because of what he perceives to be his tendency to laugh at Mme Guyon. He nevertheless finds that the anger which inspired this work revealed a hidden comic talent in Bossuet (Cf. OC, V, pp. 28-29).

Other theological questions to attract Green in his reading of Bossuet are the relationship between faith and reason and the authority of the Church and that of Scripture.

Sometimes Green finds in Bossuet a peculiar relevance to the events of the twentieth century. In July 1969 as the Americans are about to land on the moon he refers to a passage in the *Sermon sur la mort*

where Bossuet expresses his admiration for the discoveries of science which penetrate the secrets of nature and change the face of the world (Cf. OC, V, pp. 523-524).

Green admires various aspects of Bossuet's style. In his letters to la Soeur Cornuau and Mme de Maisonfort, he admires his succinctness and lucidity in explaining complex theological notions like predestination. He also appreciates his turn of phrase as for example in a letter of May 29, 1701 to Mme de Maisonfort when he says, 'Dieu veuille vous éclairer et vous faire entendre la délicatesse de sa jalousie'.

In the sermon, *Mélange des Bons avec les Méchants*, he detects a brutal and violent tone as if Bossuet had only inherited from Christ the whip with which he drove the traders from the temple. Here Green is indirectly being critical of himself as he frequently refers in his *Journal* to the virulent and fanatical tone of one of his own early works, *Pamphlet contre les Catholiques de France*.^{vi} Green also comments on Bossuet's baroque style and on its order and clarity. Indeed he adds that an *oraison funèbre* by Bossuet could be compared to a garden in Versailles. He also notes that it is a style devoid of preciousness. In a discussion on literature with a young poet he says that

the *grands lyriques* in the French tradition are Bossuet, Chateaubriand and La Fontaine. Such is his admiration of Bossuet's style that he regrets that he did not translate the Bible into French. He adds that Bossuet's translation would have been 'le monument littéraire qui eût peut-être fait passer ce livre dans le génie de la langue, comme cela est arrivé en Angleterre et en Allemagne' (OC, IV, p. 1389). In discussing Milton's style Green compares it to a palace with rooms and galleries. He finds that the nearest equivalent in French would be La Fontaine or Bossuet except that Bossuet's style does not have the 'longue promenade méditative' of Milton's.

Green's approach to Bossuet in his *Journal* is typical of his approach to other writers. He comments briefly on his reading of the writer, brings out the richness of the work in question and the pleasure which it gives him as a reader. This approach does not, however, prevent Green from maintaining a certain critical distance as we have seen in some of the reservations expressed on certain aspects of Bossuet's spirituality. We have also seen that his comments on Bossuet sometimes reveal his own preoccupations in regard to spirituality and literature and that in reading Bossuet, Green is in many ways reading and revealing himself. As Jean Lacouture put it when discussing his biography of François Mauriac, 'tout portrait qu'on peint avec âme est

un portrait non du modèle mais de l'artiste. Le modèle n'est qu'un
hasard et un prétexte'.^{vii}

ⁱ *Terre Lointaine*, in Julien Green, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, V (Paris : Gallimard, 1977), p. 1135. References to volumes of Green's *Journal* which have been published in the Pléiade will be to this edition, indicated within the text as OC, followed by the number of the appropriate volume.

ⁱⁱ *Pourquoi suis-je moi?* Journal, 1993-1996 (Paris : Fayard, 1996), pp. 298-299.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Fongaro, Antoine, *L'Existence dans les romans de Julien Green* (Roma : Signorelli, 1954), pp. 63-89.

^{iv} Chateaubriand, *Génie du Christianisme*, II, 1, 3.

^v Maurois, André, *Aspects de la biographie* (Paris: Au Sans Pareil, 1928), pp. 38-39.

^{vi} *Pamphlet contre les Catholiques de France*, *Revue des Pamphlétaires*, 15 octobre 1924.

Reissued with a preface by Jacques Maritain (Paris : Plon, 1963).

^{vii} Oliver, Annie, *Le Biographique* (Paris : Hatier, 2001), p. 103.