



***La France contre les robots* – At the Crossroads of Humanity, Law, and Prophetic Utterance**

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Abstract. ‘On ne comprend absolument rien à la civilisation moderne si l’on n’admet pas d’abord qu’elle est une conspiration contre toute forme de vie intérieure’, wrote French journalist and novelist Georges Bernanos (1888–1948) towards the end of the Second World War and his self-imposed exile in Brazil, in his last completed volume of essays, *La France contre les robots*, published in 1947. More than half a century stands between the nib of the author’s quill and the modern reader, leaving the text, its effervescent polemic and abysmal, rhetorical depths uncorroded and infinitely topical. The hermeneutics this article steps into was as complex at the time the essay was written as it is now, concerned as it is with the relationship between man and machine. Aware that mechanization has already started to (re)write history as we know it, Georges Bernanos is most concerned with the fact that ‘la civilisation des machines est celle de la quantité opposée à celle de la qualité’ in a paradigm which encourages ‘d’une manière presque unimaginable l’esprit de cupidité’ and whose most dramatic effect ‘n’est pas dans la multiplication des machines, mais dans le nombre sans cesse croissant d’hommes habitués, dès leur enfance, à ne désirer que ce que les machines peuvent donner’. With studies of law and literature and a profound understanding of the falls and decays of the human soul, treasuring that ‘supplément d’âme’ Henri Bergson speaks about, Bernanos has constantly sought to explore the perilous trails of self-estrangement mechanization, this ‘modern era’, as it is often referred to, opens in a myriad of facets and reflexions that urged him say that ‘nous n’assistons pas à la fin naturelle d’une grande civilisation humaine, mais à la naissance d’une civilisation inhumaine qui ne saurait s’établir que grâce à une vaste, à une immense, à une universelle stérilisation des hautes valeurs de la vie’. What he tries to defend is the uniqueness and singularity of man, his complexity, and not

to demonize machines and their part in reconfiguring progress, in any and all of its aspects. Danger, he warns, 'n'est pas dans la multiplication des machines, mais dans le nombre sans cesse croissant d'hommes habitués, dès leur enfance, à ne désirer que ce que les machines peuvent donner'. The key in which we intend to approach Georges Bernanos's *La France contre les robots* plays with the dichotomy of the 'productive man', epitome of the technical society, an offspring of the Anglo-Saxon skill and labour doctrine, more mechanical in its philosophy than the French ideological legal scheme of interest in the 'impact of a personality in a work of the spirit/mind'¹ of the 'contemplative man'. Whilst the first is merely a reflexion of his age, estranged from his own self, though very much a master of his time, the latter becomes the depository of the writer's hopes and symbol of creative humanity.

Keywords: human being, machine, self, law's governance, artificial intelligence

'Literature always anticipates life.'
Oscar Wilde

1. Introduction

Ezra Pound believed that 'Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree', thus acknowledging the power of creative and momentous narrative not only to weave the story of the present but also to envisage and mould the map of the future. 'Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it', would continue C. S. Lewis, firmly believing that fiction is not necessarily fictitious as it is thought-provoking and trailblazing.

Born in Paris on 20 February 1888, George Bernanos held a double degree in law and letters from the University of Paris. After a meandering journey through a most tumultuous early twentieth century, the horrors of the Great War inflicting physical injuries on his body, as he served as a corporal in the French Cavalry and received a chest wound, Bernanos turned to writing as 'a means of escape from this disgusting era'.² Following the publication of his first novel, *Sous le soleil de Satan*, in 1926, George Bernanos became one of the most important writers of French literature, as Léon Daudet prophesied it would happen in an article published in *Ecrivains et artistes* on April 7:

Demain le premier livre, le premier roman d'un jeune écrivain, M. Georges Bernanos auteur de *Sous le soleil de Satan*, sera célèbre. Je dirai de lui, comme je le disais naguère de Marcel Proust – hélas ! - qu'une grande force,

1 Kearns 2013.

2 Bernanos 1945.

intellectuelle et imaginative, apparaît au firmament des lettres françaises. Mais cette fois synthétique, et non plus analytique, et dans un genre à ma connaissance encore inexploré et qui est le domaine de la vie spirituelle, des choses et des corps commandés par les âmes.³

Nevertheless, Bernanos failed to consider himself a genuine author, as he acknowledged in *A Diary of My Times*:

I am no author. The sight alone of a blank sheet wearies my spirit, and the sheer physical isolation imposed by such work is so distasteful to me that I avoid it as much as I can. [...] I write at café tables because I cannot long be deprived of the human face and voice, which I have tried to render with dignity. Let clever folk suppose that I sit 'observing' my fellow men. I observe nothing. Observation never leads to much... I scribble in cafés just as I used to scribble in railway carriages, in order not to be taken in by figments of my own imagination, in order at a glance to re-discover, in the unknown person opposite, my own fair measure of joy or sorrow. No—I'm not an 'author'. Had I been a real one, I never should have waited until I was forty before I published my first book. [...] A vocation is always a call to action—*vocatus*—and every call must be passed on. Those to whom I call are obviously few. They will alter in nothing the ways of the world. Yet it is for them—for them that I was born.

Bernanos's legacy has spanned over the past century and proved its stamina and perceptiveness in the current whirlwind of ideas concerning one of humanity's greatest challenges – superhuman artificial intelligence. His writing most certainly did not concern only a few of his contemporaries, as the French polemicist would consider, for his voice came to speak the language of many more people, some of whom forge the history of AI as we write (speak).

2. Beyond Literature's Path, from Story to Science in the mid-1950s

Far beyond that path one may notice, looking through a telescope, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's legendary asteroid B-612 on which dwells, alongside the Little Prince and his Rose, the fervid and resolute French spirit. Most famous is the scene in which the pilot, who has crash-landed in a desert, encounters a small boy; the latter asks him to draw him a sheep, and the narrator obliges. The task is by no

3 El Gammal 2012.

means easy as he seems to lack the skills of drawing a sheep, any sheep for that matter, let alone the one the Little Prince, for this is how the narrator would refer to the child, dreams of – ‘one that will live for a long time’. The artistically challenged castaway only managed to hide one inside a box, much to the awe and joy of the Little Prince, who, given the opportunity, one can only speculate, might have turned to artificial intelligence (AI) for the perfect anti-age remedy. Sadly, though, when the Little Prince wanted to tell his story to the whole world, he realized that it was too old and not at all willing to listen to new voices and stories about the human soul and some of its most complex personal relationships.

2.1. The Fable...

One such voice was George Bernanos, who, like T. S. Eliot, Earnest Hemingway, James Joyce, William Faulkner, or George Orwell, depicts a disheartening perspective upon life devoid of any genuine human vibration and enduring spiritual values. His essay *La France contre les Robots*, published four years after the famous novella, in 1947, and anonymously translated into English as *Tradition of Freedom* (1950), focussed on the mechanization of human life and the dramatic dwindling of inner godly expression. He deplores the fall-off and simplification of man from the privileged status of bearer of divine light to a banal performer and mere doer of things.

Dans la lutte plus ou moins sournoise contre la vie intérieure, la Civilisation des Machines ne s'inspire, directement du moins, d'aucun plan idéologique, elle défend son principe essentiel, qui est celui de la primauté de l'action.⁴

The new actor on the stage of this world is *homo faber*, a threat to himself and the world he so frenziedly forges:

Human civilization, I've said it, is the whole man, the brain, the heart and the viscera, soul and body. Here is before us the man left to the mercy of his own hands, his rebellious hands, his hands suddenly multiplied by technique and mechanics, the man attacked by his hands, stripped by them, left naked like a worm who expects to be dismembered little by little, piece by piece, fibre with fibre, into total disintegration. For the atomic bomb, do not be deceived in this regard, is still a hand, though so fine, so subtle, that it breaks down the atoms as one breaks the pea-berries out of a pod. Here the technique, the science of hands, is caught in a flagrante, like the agile hand of a thief in the pocket of a looky-loo. For it is no longer about dominating matter, it is about its destruction.⁵

4 Bernanos 1947.

5 Bernanos 1953.

Like Karel Capek, the equally famous Czech writer who had not only coined the word *robot* and introduced it to the whole world in 1921 with the premiere of his three-act play *Rossum's Universal Robots* but who equally and powerfully deplored the dehumanization of man through technology, Bernanos was genuinely concerned about man's ability to fully understand and foresee all the implications of such advances. Norbert Wiener, the American mathematician and philosopher considered to be the father of cybernetics, asserts that as long as automata can be built, either in blueprints or effectively, it will only echo the natural inquisitiveness of the human mind; nevertheless, he warns us some of the reasons that lead to robotization (might) cross the line of legitimate curiosity.⁶ The strokes are bleeding on the canvas of his thoughts, flooded by the apocalyptical scenario of hopelessness, emptiness, and loss of human self and godly values. Destruction and annihilation seem to become the exclusively foreseen scenario of a civilization that fragments itself and slips into trivial nonexistence. The words compose the texture of the writer's soul, desperate to (re)create balance and harmony and to instil peace and faith in the downheartedly colourless landscape of some mechanic reality that tends to become the only framework of a new entropic universe.

Les âmes! On rougit presque d'écrire aujourd'hui ce mot sacré. Les mêmes prêtres imposteurs diront qu'aucune force au monde ne saurait avoir raison des âmes. Je ne prétends pas que la Machine à bourrer les crânes est capable de débourrer les âmes, ou de vider un homme de son âme, comme une cuisinière vide un lapin. Je crois seulement qu'un homme peut très bien garder une âme et ne pas la sentir, n'en être nullement incommodé ; cela se voit, hélas ! tous les jours. L'homme n'a de contact avec son âme que par la vie intérieure, et dans la Civilisation des Machines la vie intérieure prend peu à peu un caractère anormal.⁷

It is against such a projection that Bernanos directs his tirade and serious concern for the decline of human ideals and effacement of human sensitivity. *La France contre les robots* is about the philosopher's anguish regarding the articulation of a 'brave' new world with shallow appearances to defend and materialistic goals to construct. 'Aller vite? Mais aller où?' – asks the writer, urged as he is by the need to understand the race of the modern human actor, more concerned with his ephemeral material legacy rather than with his eternal spiritual legacy, and to make people understand that the future is not as much a projection of one's pragmatic becoming as it is a quest of a deeper spiritual nature. Swooshing right by Life and its quintessential core instead of breathing in the complex concert it entangles becomes the new and most shattering *modus vivendi*. He is not against technological progress, which he admits and supports, as the threat is not posed by

6 Wiener 1964.

7 Bernanos 1947.

the ‘multiplication des machines’ as it lies with the ‘nombre sans cesse croissant d’hommes habitués, dès leur enfance, à ne désirer que ce que les machines peuvent donner’.⁸ His battle is not against technology but against the conscience- and soul-annihilating impact of scientific progress upon ordinary people, sometimes much too eager to embrace all technical novelty without demur.

Mais à quoi bon vous dire quel type d’homme elle prépare. Imbéciles ! n’êtes-vous pas les fils ou les petits-fils d’autres imbéciles qui, au temps de ma jeunesse, face à ce colossal Bazar que fut la prétendue Exposition Universelle de 1900, s’attendrissaient sur la noble émulation des concurrences commerciales, sur les luttes pacifiques de l’Industrie ?... À quoi bon, puisque l’expérience de 1914 ne vous a pas suffi ? Celle de 1940 ne vous servira d’ailleurs pas davantage. Oh ! ce n’est pas pour vous, non ce n’est pas pour vous que je parle ! Trente, soixante, cent millions de morts ne vous détourneraient pas de votre idée fixe : « Aller plus vite, par n’importe quel moyen. » Aller vite ? Mais aller où ? Comme cela vous importe peu, imbéciles ! Dans le moment même où vous lisez ces deux mots : Aller vite, j’ai beau vous traiter d’imbéciles, vous ne me suivez plus. Déjà votre regard vacille, prend l’expression vague et têtue de l’enfant vicieux pressé de retourner à sa rêverie solitaire... « Le café au lait à Paris, l’apéritif à Chander-nagor et le dîner à San Francisco », vous vous rendez compte !... Oh ! dans la prochaine inévitable guerre, les tanks lance-flammes pourront cracher leur jet à deux mille mètres au lieu de cinquante, le visage de vos fils bouillir instantanément et leurs yeux sauter hors de l’orbite, chiens que vous êtes ! La paix venue vous recommencerez à vous féliciter du progrès mécanique. « Paris-Marseille en un quart d’heure, c’est formidable ! » Car vos fils et vos filles peuvent crever : le grand problème à résoudre sera toujours de transporter vos viandes à la vitesse de l’éclair. Que fuyez-vous donc ainsi, imbéciles ? Hélas ! c’est vous que vous fuyez, vous-mêmes – chacun de vous se fuit soi-même, comme s’il espérait courir assez vite pour sortir enfin de sa gaine de peau... On ne comprend absolument rien à la civilisation moderne si l’on n’admet pas d’abord qu’elle est une conspiration universelle contre toute espèce de vie intérieure. Hélas ! la liberté n’est pourtant qu’en vous, imbéciles !⁹

George Bernanos deliberately changes the register and chooses the companionship of punitive words only to cast the ‘evil’ spell away. Timon’s of Athens ‘fools of fortune’ (Act III, scene VI) are just as much his words as they are William Shakespeare’s.

Imbéciles de droite et de gauche, chiens que vous êtes, si vous vous grattez si furieusement, c’est que vous vous sentez, au fond, tous d’accord, vous

8 Bernanos 1947.

9 Bernanos 1947.

savez tous très bien qu'à la Civilisation des Machines doit logiquement correspondre la guerre des machines. Assez de grimaces, hypocrites !¹⁰

Beyond these bleak projections, spanning across the entire spectrum of the social life, there is an immense suffering and a hesitant world, insufficiently willing to stop from its pace and listen.

Technology is alchemy; it is the self-fulfilment of nature in place of the self-fulfilment of the life that we are. It is barbarism, the new barbarism of our time, in place of culture. Inasmuch as it puts the prescriptions and regulations of life out of play, it is not simply barbarism in its most extreme and inhumane form that has ever been known—it is sheer madness.¹¹

These are the thoughts of another French philosopher, Michel Henry, published forty years later, in 1987; the same articulate concern for the preservation of life and its intrinsic values now at risk more than ever with the development of science and technology at the expense of humanitarianism, art, ethics, emotion, and religion.

...le progrès n'est plus dans l'homme, il est dans la technique, dans le perfectionnement des méthodes capables de permettre une utilisation chaque jour plus efficace du matériel humain.¹² Ironically, the alchemy both philosophers refer to seems to be a reversed one since all it does, in the end, is to turn gold into lead. Bernanos operates with clinical precision and diagnoses a most troublesome anamnesis, which he quintessentially describes as 'décoloration de la conscience – la maladie des consciences pales'.¹³

2.2. ...and the Science

The moment *La France contre les robots* was published, the frenzy fever of scientific research that was constantly forcing the frontiers of knowledge agglutinated around such telling theories, like the one predicated by Dennis Gabor, the inventor of holography and Nobel-prize laureate for physics in 1971 – 'all that can be accomplished from a technical perspective must be accomplished, regardless of the ethical costs implied'.¹⁴ After the Second World War, the scientific community was firm in its belief that any time soon artificial intelligence would articulate a robust sense of self-awareness just as Norbert Wiener understood that 'The world

10 Bernanos 1947.

11 Henry 2012. 52.

12 Bernanos 1970 [1947].

13 Bernanos 1970 [1947].

14 Alexandre-Besnier 2019. 15.

of the future will be an even more demanding struggle against the limitations of our intelligence, not a comfortable hammock in which we can lie down to be waited upon by our robot slaves.’¹⁵ Once the threshold of the 21st century was crossed, the ideas have remained unaltered, as the fears still linger, and we only have to listen to Laurent Alexandre, a most reputed French urological surgeon, author, entrepreneur, expert on transhumanism, and Head of NBIC Finance to understand that not much has changed – ‘the fusion between human and machine will mean the annihilation of the biological man’.¹⁶ Irvin John Good, British mathematician, who worked as a chief statistician at Bletchley Park with Alan Turing and who continued to work with Turing on the design of computers after the Second World War, would define AI with the following words:

Let an ultraintelligent machine be defined as a machine that can far surpass all the intellectual activities of any man however clever. Since the design of machines is one of these intellectual activities, an ultraintelligent machine could design even better machines; there would then unquestionably be an ‘intelligence explosion’, and the intelligence of man would be left far behind. Thus the first ultraintelligent machine is the last invention that man need ever make, provided that the machine is docile enough to tell us how to keep it under control.¹⁷

Although the pioneers of artificial intelligence ‘did not contemplate the possibility of greater-than-human AI’,¹⁸ Alan Turing wholeheartedly believed in the existence of machine intelligence capable of constantly ‘improving its own architecture’.¹⁹ The robot Alan Turing was planning to design would not be an augmented humanoid but a *brain* which can be trained and taught to think, and in this respect he seemed to share a different opinion from that of his former philosophy professor at Cambridge, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who seeded his reluctance on the possibility of a machine *to think* precisely in the verb itself.²⁰

Years later, after master and disciple would have embarked upon their celestial journey, in the summer of 1956 at Dartmouth College, in the United Kingdom, a Summer Project was initiated in an attempt to ‘find how to make machines that use language, form abstractions and concepts, solve kinds of problems now reserved for humans’.²¹ It was clear that artificial intelligence and its journey was no longer a question of vague possibility but a scientific promise and certainty which would

15 Wiener 2019 [1964].

16 Alexandre–Besnier 2019. 47.

17 Good 1965. 33.

18 Bostrom 2017. 5.

19 Bostrom 2017. 34.

20 Boyle 2014. 103.

21 Bostrom 2017. 6.

only expand with its travel through time and cultures. The costs, nevertheless, were unforeseeable. Bernanos held that ‘Un monde gagné pour la Technique est perdu pour la Liberté’²² and Freedom is the very scaffolding of every spiritual evolution, evermore so of the French spirit ‘Il y a une tradition française de la Liberté. En 1789, tous les Français, pour un moment du moins, ont communiqué dans cette tradition, chacun selon l’étendue de ses connaissances ou la force de son esprit, mais avec une foi simple, unanime.’²³

In June 1949, Sir Geoffrey Jefferson, professor of neurosurgery at the University of Manchester, made the following statement in the Lister Speech entitled ‘The Mind of Mechanical Man’:

Not until a machine can write a sonnet or compose a concerto because of thoughts and emotions felt, and not by the chance fall of symbols, could we agree that machine equals brain – that is, not only write it but know that it had written it. No machine could feel pleasure at its success, grief when its valves fuse, be warmed by flattery, be made miserable by its mistakes, be charmed by sex, be angry or miserable when it cannot get what it wants.²⁴

But then few people believed that man would eventually fly to the Moon and back!

George Bernanos must have been right as nowadays Elon Musk, the founder of Paypal, Hyperloop, SolarCity, Tesla, and SpaceX, warns us that ‘AI can turn into something far more dangerous than the nuclear weapons.’²⁵ The gloomy perspective is that in order to be able to measure up to AI-endowed robots, some, and not few, scientists believe that we have to hybridize ourselves with AI just to avoid a feeling of inferiority. In an open letter published on 27 July 2015 and signed by more than one thousand renowned scholars, among whom Elon Musk (businessman), Noam Chomsky (linguist), Stephen Hawking (astrophysicist), and Bill Gates (founder of Microsoft), advocated that the AI will pose serious problems to humanity; and just a few months later Hawking would write that the ‘development of a totally complete AI may mean the end of the human race’.²⁶ To all that, we could add Ray Kurzweil’s prophecy that by 2045 a non-biological form of intelligence will surpass our own, and there is the even more serious risk that this AI will destroy what is human in us, depriving us of the will and power to decide our own fate. In fact, ever since the invention of the steam engine and the change brought about by the Industrial Revolution, the machine had become accountable for our ever-growing sense of helplessness. It is one of the factors

22 Bernanos 1947.

23 Bernanos 1947.

24 Cf. Boyle 2014. 101–102.

25 Cf. Alexandre–Besnier 2019. 46.

26 Cf. Alexandre–Besnier 2019. 83.

that are responsible for ‘the promethean shame of being oneself’, as the Austrian philosopher Gunter Anders asserts.²⁷

Nick Bostrom, the founding Director of the Future of Humanity Institute, Oxford University, author of the bestseller titled *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*, argues that true artificial intelligence might pose a threat to humanity and its evolution far greater than any other previous technological breakthrough. ‘This is quite possibly the most important and most daunting challenge humanity has ever faced. And – whether we succeed or fail – it is probably the last challenge we will ever face.’²⁸ ‘Before the prospect of an intelligence explosion, we humans are like small children playing with a bomb’, he concludes. ‘We have little idea when the detonation will happen.’ The scholar claims that there is room for only one intelligent species in each corner of the Universe, while ‘predictions about the future development of artificial intelligence are ‘as confident as they are diverse’.²⁹

Who could say that there is a space of more than sixty years between the two philosophical papers and two authors of so different an intellectual background? ‘Chaque invention nouvelle accroît le prestige de la Force, et fait décroître celui du Droit. Dans un monde armé jusqu’aux dents, le juge de Droit International Public finit par devenir une espèce de personnage cocasse, le survivant d’une époque disparue.’³⁰

3. Conclusions

When the fire engulfed the roof and spire of the Notre Dame Cathedral on 15 April 2019, Paris knelt and prayed for its symbol; emotion filled the air of the blazing dusk, and the murmur of thoughts instilled with hope was the only utterance of millions of voices. That was the moment when France proved to the world that neurons, and not silicon and human emotions, are still at the very heart of our civilization and that silicon is merely a technological implement destined to help write the future and (hopefully) not the very future itself. George Bernanos would have been relieved to see that his fellow countrymen, heirs of the superb and glorious Hellenic civilization, measure their lives against the tolls of the legendary mediaeval minster – and that is the call of *theosis* that he so much feared for.

Obéissance et irresponsabilité, voilà les deux Mots Magiques qui ouvriront demain le Paradis de la Civilisation des Machines. La civilisation française,

27 Cf. Alexandre-Besnier 2019. 84.

28 Bostrom 2017. V.

29 Bostrom 2017. 22.

30 Bernanos 1947.

héritière de la civilisation hellénique, a travaillé pendant des siècles pour former des hommes libres, c'est-à-dire pleinement responsables de leurs actes: la France refuse d'entrer dans le Paradis des Robots.³¹

On Easter Eve, France refused to be anything but a country of faith, hope, and sensitiveness.

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31 Bernanos 1947.