

# **GABRIEL MARCEL AND POSTMODERNISM: PERSPECTIVES ON A BROKEN WORLD**

Drawing principally from Marcel's work, *The Broken World* and a philosophic essay that accompanied the first publication of this play, plus a lecture "Humanity before the Alleged Death of God," that Marcel gave at numerous universities in the United States and Canada in the early 1960's, we aim to bring into clear focus perspectives that Gabriel Marcel's work has in common with postmodernism. We also hope to highlight aspects of Marcel's thought that go beyond where postmodernism is today, thus opening up ways to imagine a future for thought beyond postmodernism.<sup>1</sup>

Speaking of his own work, Marcel likened it to three coconcentric rings. This metaphor refers to levels of experience and communication. For Marcel these coconcentric layers were : (1) music - the innermost and deepest layer, (2) drama - the second level, where enflashed conflicts develop in the relationships real people are living, and (3) the third and outermost layer, philosophy - a critically reflective analysis of the questions raised by a growing consciousness of one's

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<sup>1</sup>Le Monde Cassé suivi de Position et approches concrètes du mystère ontologique, (Les Iles), Paris, Desclée De Brouwer, 1933. A translation of this version of the *The Broken World*, by Sr. Colla, appeared in a volume edited by F.J. Lescoe, *The Existentialist Drama of Gabriel Marcel*, West Hartford, Conn., McAuley Press, 1974. This edition is out of print. A new translation by K. R. Hanley, based on a 1950 version revised by Gabriel Marcel in view of a hoped for staging is projected for 1996 with a University Press. "On the Ontological Mystery" is available in a translation by Manya Harari, in *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, Secaucus, NJ, Citadel Press, 1955.

human condition.<sup>2</sup>

Marcel noted that music let him work through conflict and turmoil at a level beyond words and *eris* allowing the inner tension to resolve, although often on a note of dissonance.<sup>3</sup>

Marcel sought to deal spontaneously with some of the dilemmas in his own life situation through dramatic imagination. He envisaged characters in situations wherein they would deal concretely with some of the fundamental conflicts that plagued their lives.

Marcel's characters seemed so realistic that he claimed he could not dictate to them nor could he force their actions. Rather he had to await and respect a discovery of what this or that character would do given who s/he is and how s/he reacts to the sequence of events and circumstances in his or her life. It is a *forté* of Marcel's dramatic art that he creates characters who are so individual they seem real. His characters live as autonomous individuals, they speak as I's, and most importantly reveal what they are living inwardly. As Gaston Fessard, S.J. wrote in "Théâtre et Mystère" Marcel's characters communicate what they are living inwardly and thus allow audiences to participate in their emerging consciousness of the mystery that had penetrated their lives.<sup>4</sup>

Marcel wrote that henceforward people will have to approach his philosophy through his theater and those having sensitivity to

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<sup>2</sup>An allocution for the Alliance Française, "Le Paradoxe du Philosophe-Dramaturge," Collection Française de Notre Temps Nous Confie, sous le patronage de l'Alliance Française, No date. Cf. K. R. Hanley, *Dramatic Approaches to Creative Fidelity: A study in the Theater and Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973)*, Lanham, MD, University Press of America, 1987, Ch. I, pp. 3-26.

<sup>3</sup>G. Marcel's Introduction to *The Broken World, The Existentialist Drama of Gabriel Marcel*, West Hartford, Conn., McAuley Press, 1974, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup>Gaston Fessard, S.J., "Théâtre et Mystère," published as an introductory essay to Marcel's play, "La Soif," Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1938, pp. 5-116.

music, will have a privileged affinity for his work.<sup>5</sup>

With Nietzsche as well as Coleridge and others, Marcel saw that questions of meaning and value would have to be approached through aesthetics and creative imagination. This discovery had peculiar meaning in the life of Gabriel Marcel. Marcel observed that his sensitive listening as musician and his creative imagination as dramaturge enabled him to grapple with the tensions that gripped his life and begin to forge a path for his freedom by bringing deep conflict and obscure dilemmas to the light of the stage. Then philosophic inquiry let him reflect critically on concrete situations and bring these issues to light. Finally philosophy's reasoned analysis, which stays close to the sinuosities of life, can offer in general terms alternative interpretations to the existential questions life raises.

### **Portrayal of A "Broken World"**

Marcel brought to the postmodern scene the image of "a broken world". The author states that the whole of his theatrical corpus could be called a theater of a broken world. And the play that bears the title *The Broken World* portrays the situation of Christiane, the play's main character, who without love or any hope for real love has married a distinguished but lack-luster personality Lawrence Chesnay.

Act I, Scene IV, Christiane, in conversation with Denise Furstlin a girlhood friend who later commits suicide, voices her awareness of her life situation.

Christiane: Don't you have the sense that we are living . . . if you can call that living . . . in a broken world. Yes, broken like a watch that has stopped. It's mainspring no longer works. To all appearances nothing has changed. Everything is in place. But if you put the watch to your ear. . . you hear nothing. Remember, the world, or what we used to call the world, the human world . . . before, it must have had a heart. But it seems that heart has stopped beating. Lawrence codifies regulations, Daddy has season tickets at

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<sup>5</sup>Kenneth T. Gallagher, *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, NY, Fordham University Press, 1962, 1975, p. viii.

the Symphony and keeps a mistress cheaply. Henry is preparing a trip around the world. . . Antonov conducts rehearsals of his symphonic poem. Everyone has their own little niche, their own little thing, their own little interests. People meet, or more accurately bump into each other. That makes quite a racket. . . But there's no center, no life, nowhere.

Denise: And where are you in all this?

Christiane: Me . . . let's say, I listen.

Denise: In a vacuum?

Christiane: You said it, in a vacuum.

Denise: And with the rest of your time?

Christiane: I suppose . . . I exist. I am what one calls a "busy woman." (*The Broken World*, Act I, Scene 4)<sup>6</sup>

Here we see that Marcel has conveyed not only the image but moreover the sense of living in a postmodern "broken world." Christiane gives voice to her consciousness of a fragmented world. Her family and friends view life from different very limited perspectives. Christiane is catalyst for the activities of her circle of "friends." Highly intelligent, she travels from one place to another, jumps from one project to the next finding diversion and distraction but never seeking a resting place or satisfaction.

Christiane is flattered by the admiration she attracts. Still all her relations are marked by a certain shallowness and a studied distance. The lives of Christiane and her circle of friends are marked by shallow, temporary relationships. Most live on a very superficial level. She even protests to Henry, a confidant, "I am not like the others." At times Christiane suffers a profound uneasiness. She even states that some part of herself finds this kind of life vacuous. Still she and her group pride themselves on their liberalism. They seem to enjoy pushing back the frontiers of liberal thought and action including gay and lesbian relations, live-in arrangements, serial marriages and the reduction of morality to a question of individual preferences in life style.

Out of boredom, Christiane invents a "fiction" drawn from the

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<sup>6</sup>References to the play *The Broken World* will appear in parentheses in the text. Hereafter noted in the following format: (BW, I, 4)

shadow side of her character which without explicitly intending to gives cryptic expression to her true plight. Longing for genuine friendship and communication with her husband, she "invents" a story that she has been rejected by someone to whom she is attracted.

This "apparent" humiliation of Christiane is just what is called for to draw Lawrence from his pout over her being the object of so much adulation while he is continually overlooked and ignored.

However, Christiane's scheme succeeds all too well. Lawrence reacts exactly as Christiane foresaw. His sense of wounded pride causes him to delight in his wife's apparent humiliation and this meanspirited pleasure colors his expressions of "compassion". Christiane disdains Lawrence for his meanness of spirit. She is likewise disgusted with herself for her deceptiveness.

As the play progresses, Act III, Christiane's discomfort with her situation worsens. Her mood deteriorates to the point that when she learns of the early death of a friend from her youth, the one friend she really loved, she is despondent. She falls into the arms of a young admirer, "not out of love but out of longing for love," crying, "Gilbert, don't abandon me..." (BW, III, )

Toward the end of the play, Act IV, everything suggests that Christiane, like so many of her "friends", will split from her household and go off with a new found "lover." But a startling break through of an event from the past occurs unexpectedly, in an Ibsenesque fashion, creating a reversal of direction and giving rise to a surprise ending. (BW, IV, 6 & 7)<sup>7</sup>

A long forgotten acquaintance from the past brings Christiane news which assures her that she is loved. Jacques Delorme in his later years as a monk learned of her love, cherished it and on another level reciprocated it. This message which his sister Genevieve communicates frees Christiane to be in touch with the true depth and

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<sup>7</sup>"Drama of the Soul in Exile," Preface, *Three Plays*, NY, Hill and Wang, 1958, p. 32; "My Dramatic Works as Viewed by the Philosopher," in *Searchings*, NY, Newman Press, 1967, pp. 103-04.

center of herself from which she had become alienated by a traumatizing experience that left her feeling rejected and hopeless of experiencing true love ever again.

Freed from her trauma, Christiane experiences a spirit of truth and love that enables her to approach her husband sincerely, confessing her weakness which had played off his, and now in this new light humbly offering to share her love with him. Lawrence stunned, comments, "It's as if you've come back to me from the dead." To which, Christiane responds, "I shall try to be worthy of those words." (BW, IV, 7)

This sudden ending and stunning reversal in the last scene takes audiences by surprise. But Marcel has observed in his writings as drama critic that it is the last act and especially the last scene that gives a play its power and meaning.<sup>8</sup>

The last scene is a surprise, yet when audiences reconstruct the play in light of it, they can see how the ending was in fact prepared throughout the entire play.

Marcel notes that without a certain development in his life that opened him to a whole other level of his own being, he would not have been able to create such an ending. The ending is prepared. It is plausible. Marcel even received testimony of a similar instance that occurred in real life to a benedictine monk in Hungary.<sup>9</sup> What Marcel is doing is sharing with his audience, communicating through the self revelation of the play's main characters - the witness of something that touched and became part of his own life.

In presenting the drama of people who in their own lives become open to and enriched by the spiritual, Marcel opens up a path that may enable audiences to discover the presence of the spiritual operating within their own lives.

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<sup>8</sup>"Drama of the Soul in Exile," p. 30; Preface to *Le Secret est dans les Isles*, Paris, Plon, 1967, pp. 20-21.

<sup>9</sup>Introduction to *the Broken World*, p. 16.

## Affinities of Approach

Not only does Marcel artfully portray the sense of the "broken world" that postmodernism acknowledges, we shall also see that his approach toward focusing on important issues has much in common with postmodernism.

In the essay "On the Ontological Mystery" Marcel considers the question, brought to light through Christiane's heightening consciousness of living in a broken world. The question is, "Who am I? - Is life empty of full?" Marcel describes the sense of the question and then ponders what might be the basis for anyone having the credentials and the confidence to deal with such a question. (OM, pp. 16-17)<sup>10</sup>

As Marcel reflects critically on these matters, we note his approach has multiple affinities with postmodernism but also that Marcel's approach while not being alien to postmodern perspectives nevertheless goes beyond postmodernism opening up a further line of inquiry that need not be inimical to postmodernism's perspectives of thought. Marcel critiques the oversimplifications of rationalism, idealism, and empiricism. And he moreover seeks correctives that would allow him to deal meaningfully with some of the crucial issues life involves.

Marcel rejects the rationalism and dualism of René Descartes, and criticizes Descartes' excessive ambition to found truth in an indubitable idea from which all else follows logically. Although Marcel was schooled in the German and Anglo-Saxon idealism of his day, he found its approach inadequate for dealing with real life issues. And even though he continued to admire American philosophers like Josiah Royce, W. E. Hocking, Bradley and others for their efforts to deal with values affecting human community, he felt the need for a meatier approach in philosophic investigation.<sup>11</sup> Marcel likewise found untenable the limits empiricism placed on the notion of

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<sup>10</sup>Hereafter "On the Ontological Mystery" reference are noted: (OM, 16-17).

<sup>11</sup>Intro. to *The Broken World*, p. 12.

"experience" confining its application exclusively to the kind of experience appropriate to investigations in empiric physical sciences.

In opposition to the rationalism of Descartes, Marcel proposed a radical revolution. Reversing the (in)famous "*cogito . . .*", Marcel declared, "Being is an affirmation I *am* rather than an affirmation I *utter*." (OM,18) This statement shifts the epistemological focus and reestablishes the priority of being. It is being that first presents itself evidencing its reality and progressively revealing itself to a welcoming attentive consciousness. Being in its richness is present, revealing itself so that consciousness can become cognizant of it. Marcel offers another metaphor, "My inquiry into being presupposes an affirmation in regard to which I am, in a sense, passive, and of which I am the stage rather than a spectator." (OM,18) One is not a disengaged distant spectator of life. One is touched and affected by life's realities. So it is that being plays itself out on the stage of one's consciousness. Indeed one experiences being's presence as revealed through the interaction of enfleshed persons in a concrete life situation.

In sum Marcel rooted thought in the direct presence of the reality under investigation to the incarnate, affective, cognitive subject experiencing it, not in a cogito, transcendental ego, or absolute idea. For the pretentious claims of idealism, Marcel substituted a more modest and concrete approach. Rather than founding knowledge in any transcendental ego and its abstract and absolute perspective, Marcel pursued his more modest experience of perspectival approaches of an incarnate being.<sup>12</sup> Rather than in a series of eidetic reductions Marcel found knowledge through critically reflective clarification of the sensitive, cognitive, affective exploration of realities given within one's experience.

Eschewing any pretension to create a "system" of philosophy, something Marcel neither could nor would produce, he preferred to explore human life from many different incarnate points of view. He was willing to forego some of idealism's claims of universality

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<sup>12</sup>*Creative Fidelity*, N.Y., Crossroad, 1982; copyright by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1964, Ch. I: Incarnate being as the central datum of metaphysics, pp. 11-57. (It is noteworthy that the 1982 and 1964 editions have identical pagination.)

preferring to stay close to the richness of concrete approaches to issues and questions affecting human life. In gatherings for conversation at his home, 21 rue de Tournon, Paris VI, there was one ground rule for presentations. No abstract conceptual analyses presented solely on the theoretic level were allowed. Any issue raised had to be explored in terms of concrete human individuals involved in a real life situation. It is along this vein that we can begin to understand Marcel's choice to place a quote from E.M. Forster in *Creative Fidelity*, suggesting that it is in the individual that we find the infinite.<sup>13</sup> In the above ways Marcel enriched and deepened the notion of subjectivity.

Marcel also extended the notion of what may be gathered in the more realistic scope of human experience. Marcel saw as arbitrary and prejudicial the attempt to limit experience to sense perception or scientific observation of physical phenomena. With other existential thinkers Marcel extends the notion of experience to include the awareness of whatever impacts the senses, emotions, feelings, heart, consciousness or spirit of a person.

Marcel also transcended the limits of modern thought when he introduced the revolutionary notion of embodied subjectivity. Marcel's starting point for the phenomenological analyses of *Creative Fidelity* was Ch. I: Incarnate Being.<sup>14</sup> This Marcelian approach, experiencing and thinking human being incarnately as embodied subjectivity, enabled the overcoming of Cartesian dualism. Marcel's thought on incarnate being as embodied subjectivity is a significant moment in the whole history of human thought on this topic. His analyses and insights are certainly as rich and revolutionary as those found in the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Marcel's description of the phenomenon of incarnate being and his critical reflections overturning Cartesian dualism is not merely a chapter in his book

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<sup>13</sup>*Creative Fidelity*, p. 147. "It is private life that holds out the mirror to infinity; person intercourse, and that alone, that ever hints at a personality beyond our daily vision.", E.M. Forster, *Howard's End*, London, Edward Arnold & Co., 1910, p. 78.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 32-57. It is noteworthy that the original title of this book in French was *Du Refus à L'Invocation*. (*From Refusal to Invocation*.)

*Creative Fidelity*; they remain central to his entire approach and thought.

Marcel transcended Cartesian mind/body dualism in its two principal aspects. First he finds human consciousness enmeshed in incarnate being. Marcel's thinking is that of an embodied subjectivity inclusive of affective as well as cognitive dimensions. And second, as we shall examine presently, Marcel overcomes the subject/object or *res cogitans/res extensa* dichotomy in his notion of experience, as it is the starting point and the central datum in a search for human meaning through a reflective clarification of mystery as opposed to a merely empiric investigation of object-like problems.

Marcel has depicted the situation of a broken world. He has articulated the same essential criticism of modern idealism and empiricism as most post modernists do. And now we shall see further that as he tried to deal with the question, "Who am I? - Is Being empty or full?", which emerges in the situation of a broken world, Marcel has evolved his own approach for grappling with this task.

As Paul Ricoeur once mentioned, if phenomenology had not existed Marcel would have had to invent it. As Herbert Spiegelberg showed in his remarkable portrayal of *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*, Marcel like other existential thinkers held in common the perspectives of the phenomenological movement, yet each developed their approaches in ways suited to the particular questions or area of investigation they chose to explore. Readers should not be suprised that Marcel's approach has much in common with the phenomenological method.<sup>15</sup>

Certainly viewing phenomena from different perspectives to bring into focus different aspects of meaning about the reality under investigation is an enriching approach that Marcel's thought has in common with phenomenology and postmodernism. And the same rules for certitude and evidence apply within phenomenology and

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<sup>15</sup>Paul Ricoeur, "Gabriel Marcel et la Phenomenology," in *Entretiens autour de Gabriel Marcel, Neuchatel, à la Baconnière, 1976*, pp. 53-74; Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement, A Historical Introduction*, Vol. I The German Phase, Vol. II The French Phase, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1965, pp. 421-444.

Marcel's reasoned analyses, openness to a full experience of a given reality and a willingness to entertain alternative interpretations and research the attitudes and stances or even fundamental presupposition from which these attitudes and interpretations arise.

Marcel observed that freedom plays an extremely important role in his thought. Freedom is not so much a theme he explores, as it is at the heart and center of all his thought. For post modernism freedom is a value and a goal. Yet Marcel recognized freedom as determinative of the philosophic process. Indeed he wrote that metaphysics is the logic of freedom. One aspect of what I believe Marcel has in mind is that what we attend to in our experience and also in our viewing, analyzing, critical reasoning and interpreting is significantly influenced by our freedom. Marcel recognizes that the various interpretations we find for one and the same situation are influenced if not determined by the attitude and stance of the investigator.

As Marcel addressed the question, "Who am I? - Is Being empty or full?", he established the subject's credibility for examining this question by affirming the presence of being to the inquirer, and he sketched his method of inquiry by distinguishing problem and mystery, and then identifying the steps of recollection and reflection. When Marcel articulates the question that grows out of ontological uneasiness, he likewise opens a path for exploring it. One's access to Being is assured because "Being is an affirmation I *am* rather than an affirmation I *utter*: by uttering it I break it, I divide it, I am on the point of betraying it." And Marcel situates this question as a mystery by his classic statement that "my inquiry into being presupposes an affirmation in regard to which I am, in a sense, passive, *and of which I am the stage rather than the subject.*" (OM,12-15,18)

Marcel evolved his approach in his own way, using his own words. In his effort to overcome the subject//object dichotomy that has plagued modern thought he developed the notion of problem versus mystery. He also used the description of one's experience and the reflective clarification of mystery as a way to explore dimensions of human experience that escape the too narrow and reductionist interpretations derived from empiric observation exclusively.

In a problematic approach, the model of experience is characterized by a subject/object dichotomy. And in a problematic approach the ideal of objectivity rules, with its goal that interpretation of sensibly or scientifically observed data be free from the influence of the investigator. Data, observation and interpretation are to be based solely in the objective pole of knowledge. By contrast in the case of a mystery the subject investigating is included in the data under investigation. "A mystery is a problem which encroaches on its own data, thereby transcending itself as a simple problem." (OM,19) We might also paraphrase that quote to read, a mystery is a problem whose data encroaches upon the subject, for in the case of a mystery the subject investigator plays a uniquely active and indispensable role in the constitution of meaning. First the reality of a mystery does not enter into the realm of one's experience, unless that person is open and welcomes an encounter with the reality in question. One must be willing to be touched and affected by the mystery. Second the investigator plays a uniquely active role in constituting the careful description, reasoned analysis and critically weighed interpretation of the phenomenon in question. Another aspect of the problem versus mystery distinction is that a problem is something to be solved, and once resolved its meaning is laid bare, whereas a mystery discloses its essential significance, yet its full meaning is inexhaustible. (OM,18-21)<sup>16</sup>

An illustration will help clarify the problem--mystery distinction. From the problematic approach an explanation of the fact that two people chance to meet may be found in their socio-economic background, state of health or preference in sports. Then the probability of these two individuals meeting at a ski resort or a health spa can be calculated. The above factors are measurable variables that can account for the likelihood of an encounter taking place, i.e. two people being in the same place at the same time.

But taken as a mystery, an encounter that leads to a deep and lasting friendship is a reality that has a far deeper meaning. Approached as a mystery, an encounter is an event that has left a

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<sup>16</sup>Cf. Katharine Rose Hanley and J. Donald Monan, S.J., *A Prelude to Metaphysics, Being interrogated through reflection and history*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall Inc., 1967, pp. 79-100.

deep and lasting trace upon my life. The occurrence of an I-Thou encounter depends on persons being open to it, being touched by it and welcoming it into their lives. And an encounter is a reality that belongs to the realm of intersubjectivity and should be reckoned in terms proper to human relations. The meaning of an I-Thou encounter, an event that has left a deep and lasting trace upon our life, occurs through a dialogue of freedoms. One person, the I, concretely expresses an appeal. The Thou, another I, is free to ignore, postpone, refuse or respond to that appeal. If both agree, there occurs the gratuitous and reciprocal gift of presence. Presence, that gift of intersubjectivity with and for one another, is the essence of an encounter. And it is coconstituted by a dialogue of freedoms. (OM,21-23)

Whether one is open to certain realities, like friendship, fidelity, etc., depends on the free choice and affective attitude a person adopts. Whatever attitude one adopts and whatever interpretation one espouses as the meaning of a phenomenon depends on the autonomous choice which springs from that individual's freedom and at times the interplay of freedom and grace.

Recognition of this fact leads Marcel to always include a second level of reflection about a phenomenon. For example, after describing the essential characteristics of an I-Thou encounter; Marcel investigates the necessary conditions of possibility for its occurrence. These he situates in subjective attitudes, namely availability or unavailability, *i.e.* freedom's willingness or unwillingness to be permeable, open in depth, to evoke, actively await presence.(OM,39-43)

Different interpretations result from different affective attitudes or different freely adopted stances. This is one distinctive and important way Marcel sees freedom as central to anyone's thought. We shall see a further significance of this idea in our concluding section.

When Marcel explores the question, "Who am I? - Is Being empty of full?", he approaches it as a mystery. And Marcel opens up a path of discovery when he suggests we may take up this quest through "Recollection" and "Reflection." "Recollection is that act

whereby I re-collect myself as a unity; and this hold, this grasp upon myself, is also relaxation and abandon. Abandon to ... relaxation in the presence of ... - yet there is no noun for these prepositions to govern. The way stops at the threshold." (OM,23) "*... in this withdrawal I carry with me that which I am and which perhaps my life is not.*" (OM,24) And a "second reflection is recollection in the measure in which recollection can be self-conscious." (OM,25)

So pursuing the question of "Who am I?" through recollection and reflection, we can gather different perspectives of insight. Am I merely my functions, my roles, my curriculum vitae or life history? Recollection lets me be open to what is part of my life yet what is other and more than my life. Reflection is a turning back so as to view, bring into focus, and see more clearly what is given within one's life experience. Through recollection and reflection I may encounter and recognize as mysteries of being in which I can participate: love, hope, friendship, the personalizing force of loved ones who are present participating in my life, a Transcendent-immanent Force, an Ultimate Recourse, an Absolute Thou who is with and for me, or Nothingness. Recollection allows the fathoming of whether Being is empty or full. Marcel's reflections offer a preliminary indication of what Being refers to. "Being is -or should be- necessary. It is impossible that everything should be reduced to a play of successive appearances which are inconsistent with each other ("inconsistent" is essential), or, in the words of Shakespeare, to 'a tale told by an idiot.' I aspire to participate in this being, in this reality-and perhaps this aspiration is already a degree of participation, however rudimentary." (OM,14) Does Being not respond to an ontological need, a search for something that would withstand all attempts to debunk it and render it devoid of intrinsic or significant value. (OM,13-14)

As Marcel proceeds in the final part of his essay "On the Ontological Mystery" to clarify reflectively what can be found as part of the mystery of being, he shows again the central role freedom plays in the discovery and determination of meaning. He begins by considering the alternatives of hope and despair, noting that the human condition has only to let itself go to its own weight to be drawn toward the tragic. (OM,26) And he remarks that true hope in its greatest intensity arises in a situation wherein despair remains a genuine temptation. We cannot but think of the very similar situations

of Denise who committed suicide, and Christiane who in her dire moment found resources supporting her ability to love and to hope. Keeping central the awareness that freedom is what determines one's openness to participate in the mystery of being, Marcel clarifies the phenomenon of presence and develops the notion of fidelity, bringing to light the distinctive feature these have in common namely providing renewed resources and an incitement to create. (OM,32-40)

After a first moment that describes, analyzes and interpretes what is given to one's recollection and the critically clarified consciousness reflection brings, Marcel always introduces a subsequent moment to identify the underlying attitudes that are requisite conditions of possibility for the phenomenon to have occurred in the first place. For example, how is it that some people are capable of presence and others seem not? Marcel through a second reflection brings to light that a person's attitude of availability or unavailability will influence whether or not that person is capable of the openness, receptivity or permeability that are requisite for presence to occur. (OM,39-40)

### **A Way of Researching Ultimate Concerns**

Of particular interest in this conversation about Gabriel Marcel and postmoderns are the different ways of dealing with questions of ultimate concern. On this point Marcel has something unique and distinctive to offer.

Marcel is very aware of different points of view and indeed very respectful of them. Marcel observed that one of the challenges of his life, even from the days of his early childhood, was to deal with the fundamental antinomies life presents. There seemed to be irreconcilable differences of opinion on the Dreyfus Affair, on how to handle divorce within the extended family, etc. His plays and essays try to deal with fundamental conflicts and present different points of view intelligibly and fairly. As Marcel wrote, he hoped to communicate a spirit of kinship, one that says, "you are understood." He also hoped his theater could bring people to a standpoint from which the diversity in stances and interpretations is understood in a spirit of

compassion that blends lucidity and love.<sup>17</sup>

With Marcel's respect for diversity there is a large place for freedom and tolerance in his thought, but Marcel does not succumb to the slough of relativism. He respects each person's right to their point of view, but he goes a step further and unearths the fundamental presuppositions and basic attitudes that underlie each different point of view. So rather than adopt the popular stance of pretending to be perfectly balanced in obedience before several varying options, Marcel is willing to move beyond this impasse and forge a path for freedom's commitment through a critically enlightened choice.

Marcel examines each position put forth to critically clarify its merits. He moreover examines the attitudes and fundamental presuppositions from which each interpretation springs. Thus Marcel brings to light through critical reasoning the significance of each option and also clarifies its subjective and ontological foundations.

Marcel acknowledges there is an ethical dimension to his work in that it offers an invitation to freedom "a call to be."<sup>18</sup> Marcel invites people to freely espouse a commitment to what is our noblest human potential and to what will fulfill our highest human hope. By examining each position and bringing to light the fundamental presuppositions that underlie it, Marcel illumines a path enabling others to make authentic free choices. The criteria for a choice are as follows. What among alternatives would lead to a more authentic and humanizing life for oneself and others? Or what choice invites one to fulfill one's noblest human potential? Marcel's invitation is addressed to one's freedom and it is a call to authenticity. It is a call to be oneself in the noblest and most humanly fulfilling way.

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<sup>17</sup>"The Drama of the Soul in Exile," p. 21; "Essay in Autobiography," in *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, Secaucus, NJ, 1956, pp. 106-7; "My Dramatic Works as viewed by the Philosopher," in *Searchings*, NY, Newman Press, 1967, p. 116; "De la Recherche Philosophique," in *Entretiens autour de Gabriel Marcel*, p. 17; *The Existential Background of Human Dignity*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1963, pp. 17-18, 107.

<sup>18</sup>"The Drama of the Soul in Exile," p. 33.

Marcel thus presents an alternative to groundless relativism. And this he does in a way respectful of freedom and one's individual dignity. Always setting out clearly the alternative ways one can go and what these different ways involve, Marcel invites people in a postmodern world to explore their own experiences in quality and depth with the hope of finding something within being that withstands all attempts to debunk it and render it devoid of intrinsic value, something which cannot be reduced to a play of successive appearances which are inconsistent with each other. (OM, 14)

So while Marcel's work has affinities with postmodernism in that he transcends the artificially limiting constraints of idealism and empiricism, resists all "totalizing" efforts in philosophy and politics, and eschews systematic "rationalistic" thought to pursue a concrete existential approach, his work differs from postmodernism in several radically important ways. Postmodernism in general is epistemologically and axiologically relativistic and for the most part rejects foundations, especially ontological ones. Marcel, for his part, respects different points of view, but after having examined and understood them, and searched out the fundamental attitude from which they spring, does not hesitate to move his investigation further. His inquiry goes on to distinguish which attitudes and interpretations are respectful of human dignity and which are not. He investigates which attitudes and interpretations invite the actualization of one's noblest human potential and which fail to do so.

Another important way that Marcel's work differs from postmodernism is that he goes beyond relativism by illuminating the subjective attitudes which give rise to differing interpretations and also clarifying the way to discover ontological foundations for one interpretation rather than another. As *The Broken World* shows and "The Ontological Mystery" explicates most persons are not satisfied to live on a superficial level, but long to be in touch with their own being and to live out of their own center even at the depth which questions whether Being is empty or full. And Gabriel Marcel progressively explicates the ontological need that underlies this quest.

## **Beyond a Postmodern Assumption of Nietzschean Nihilism**

Marcel opens up a path that leads beyond where postmodernism is today. While respecting diversity of opinion, affective attitude and fundamental stance, Gabriel Marcel offers a new way of pursuing the question of Being, Transcendence or the Sacred. In his "Essay in Autobiography" Marcel noted that the central metaphysical preoccupation of his thought was to discover how a subject in his/her actual capacity as a subject is related to a reality which cannot in this context be regarded as objective, yet which is persistently required and recognised as real. (EA, 127)

As we noted at the beginning of this essay Marcel's experience and communication occurs as it were through three coconcentric rings. We shall follow that pattern of development in this final section that traces, perhaps too summarily, Marcel's perspective on researching a quest for God.

Questions of ultimate concern were part of Marcel's life from his early years on. This occurred first like music, the inner most circle of experience and communication, that is heard by way of inwardness and depth. As a child Marcel suffered from the desert like atmosphere of a household with no religion, where the only presence of the sacred was through the music of a Bach, Beethoven and the like. Marcel was also preoccupied with what becomes of loved ones after they have died. This preoccupation originated with his concern for his mother who died when Gabriel was four.<sup>19</sup>

These concerns continued through his adult years. Marcel researched them dramatically, the second coconcentric ring, and philosophically, the third coconcentric ring.<sup>20</sup> These two avenues of

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<sup>19</sup>"Essay in Autobiography," pp. 109-10, 112; "My Dramatic Works as Viewed by the Philosopher", p. 96.

<sup>20</sup>*Presence and Immortality*, Pittsburgh, PA, Duquesne University Press, 1967; Cf. K.R. Hanley, *Dramatic Approaches to Creative Fidelity, A Study in the Theater and Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel*, Ch. II: "The Unfathomable: A Search for Presence", pp. 55-75.

concern led Marcel to discover a mode of experiencing the presence of loved ones from beyond death. His clarification of intersubjectivity and the conditions of possibility for its occurrence suggest a way for persons to encounter a Transcendent.

Indeed the drama of *The Broken World* witnesses the possibility of an experience of light and love from beyond that lets a person find her true self centered in the depth of her being, and the spiritual influx she experiences impels her to reach out to her husband in a spirit of truth and love. (BW, IV, 6 & 7) This break through to a spiritual dimension brings a stunning ending to the play, and opens up for audiences a path toward discovering their rootedness in Being.

Christiane was living self-deception and deception of others. She was bored with her superficial relations and flirtations and likewise dissatisfied with her fugues and her artistic diversions as a dilettante. Overwhelmed with the shallowness, the emptiness of her life, Christiane is about to cast it all over, go off with a new young lover, perhaps even leave in a suicide of despair as did her girlhood friend Denise. But then there is a breakthrough of an event from the past. Genevieve's visit discloses that she knew of Christiane's love of Jacques. Genevieve's visit also brings the disclosure that after years in the monastery Jacques became aware of Christiane's love and reciprocated it. He recognized that the same act which meant for him his happiness and salvation meant for Christiane her loss and perhaps even perdition. Thereafter he felt responsible for her, and prayed for her that a light would come to her, and that he perhaps might have some small part in that.

It is striking to read the essay "On the Ontological Mystery" as a commentary on the events in the life of Christiane as she struggles in *The Broken World*. And yet this is precisely the manner in which essay was composed. It was not written as a philosophic paper or research thesis but as a philosophic reflection of the concrete drama of Christiane and her growing consciousness of the interpersonal relations that made up her life situation in *The Broken World*.

In *The Broken World*, a witness, Genevieve Forgue, communicates a spirit of love and truth that touches and affects

Christiane. Genevieve also invites Christiane to welcome this spirit of love and truth that Genevieve speaks of and radiates and which Christiane can accept and live by. (BW, IV, 6)

The reference in the essay "On the Ontological Mystery" to an encounter that has left a deep and lasting trace upon one's life certainly applies to Christiane and her relation with Jacques. Other comments refer to Christiane's situation as well. "It depends upon us to be permeable to this influx (of presence), but not, to tell the truth, to call it forth." (OM, 38) This is true for the original encounter and building of friendship, it is *a fortiori* true of the spiritual influx after Jacques' death that transforms Christiane's life, and it will be also be true of the future renewals of presence conferred from beyond death. We can hear Marcel's remark, as applying to Christiane situation and hope for the future, when we read that "Creative fidelity consists in maintaining ourselves actively in a permeable state; and there is a mysterious interchange between this free act and the gift granted in response to it." (OM, 38)

We cannot but help think of Act IV, Scene 6 when we read Marcel's description of the meta-problematic as a presence that becomes part of one's being. To deny it is to betray it. It is an assurance of the order of the affirmation, "you are loved." The gift of presence breaks through and heals a trauma thus liberating the love, the hope and all the creative energies of Christiane's life.

We can envision Christiane asking and reflecting on the question, "Who am I? - Is Being empty or full?". We can remember the alternative of her dissatisfaction with her life, in Act I, Scene 4, in conversation with Henry, and again in the beginning of Act IV, Scene 6 in conversation with Genevieve. Yet we can see a very different picture of the landscape of her life as the play ends. It is in the latter framework that encounter, presence, love - not betrayed without loss of one's very being and life, and presence renewed and maintained through creative fidelity and marked by its signal benefit an incitement to create. (BW, IV, 7; OM, 22-42)

As we reflect on Christiane's life, and the possibility of the new answer she can give through freely accepting the light and assurance of love, we get an inkling of the way in which Christiane is invited to

fulfill her authentic potential, called to become in action what her true self is in anticipation.

Toward the end of the essay "On the Ontological Mystery," Marcel highlights the alternative stances of availability or unavailability from which a response may spring. If one lives closed, absorbed in oneself, not caring for or really being with and for others, then one is a mere shadow of oneself - as Christiane admittedly was through most of the *The Broken World*. Or one may be permeable to the call to become one's true self, fulfilled through openness and response to the opportunities to be with and for others and the Other.

Marcel himself was very aware of the difficulty there is in coming to faith. He acknowledged that he was perhaps more at home with the unbeliever than with the believer because for many years he did not believe, and even after he came to faith he was still keenly aware of the unbelief that remained at the heart of his belief - those areas of his life where the gospel had not yet been preached.<sup>21</sup>

Marcel explored extensively the conditions of possibility for someone coming to faith and the path by which an individual might access faith in *Le Seuil Invisible* and *The Metaphysical Journal*.<sup>22</sup> A later work, *Creative Fidelity*, which originally had the title, *Du Refus à l'Invocation*, contains a remarkably thorough critical analysis of the difference between opinion and faith.<sup>23</sup> Marcel preferred to think faith along the lines of interpersonal trust rather than along the lines of opinion. His book *Creative Fidelity* traces a critical description of faith in its development as an interpersonal relation that can lead to an intersubjectivity of being.<sup>24</sup> He noted that "the act of belief in or about something or someone implies giving credit." And he adds that "the

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<sup>21</sup>*Creative Fidelity*, Ch. VI, pp. 120-121.

<sup>22</sup> *Le Seuil Invisible*, (*The Invisible Threshold: Grace and The Sand Castle*) Paris, Editions Grasset, 1914; *A Metaphysical Journal*, Paris, Gallimard, 1927; Chicago, H. Regnery Co., 1954.

<sup>23</sup>*Creative Fidelity*, Ch. VI, From Opinion to Faith, pp. 120-139.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, Ch. VII, VIII, IX

credit I extend is, in a way, myself.<sup>25</sup> "Believing means giving oneself, rallying to." And as Bergson observed, "The strongest or most vital belief is one which brings all the powers of our being most completely into play..." Marcel further notes that one can only trust a "thou," a reality capable of fulfilling the function of a "thou," of being invoked, of becoming something I can fall back on. Then the question "Who am I?" changes imperceptibly into an appeal to an ultimate recourse.<sup>26</sup> "Reflection...is directed on an *I believe* which can be explicated only when construed in the form of *I believe in You, who are my sole recourse.*" And he further notes that "*this reality gives me to myself insofar as I give myself to it; it is through the mediation of the act in which I center myself on it, that I truly become a subject.*"<sup>27</sup> Rather than arguments, proofs for the existence of God or metaphysics that situate God as the keystone in the rationalist structure of an idealist system, Marcel presents an existential approach that leads not just to a logical conclusion about God, that God exists or that God has certain attributes, but rather leads to existential encounter, i.e. one's own experience of God present and active in one's life.

Marcel suggested an approach to faith lived as trust, not mere opinion. He moreover describes the steps in this approach to faith in terms drawn from interpersonal relations among human persons. He sees a dialogue of freedoms, an appeal and a response and then by mutual agreement a co-consitution of presence has the gratuitous gift of being with and for one another.

Marcel points out that such presence once conferred can be renewed, and encountered by way of inwardness and depth. Such renewals of presence are marked by a spiritual influx that uplifts and enriches ones personalizing acts of love, hope and creativity. Marcel also affirms that an absolute Thou may be met as one's ultimate recourse.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 182-3.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 145.

One's confidence to open to the light and love of God, Marcel notes, is often facilitated by a human person who is a witness, i.e. someone who interacts in such a way that her spirit of light and love radiates to the person with whom she interacts and for whom she becomes a loving and mediating presence. Such is the case in *The Broken World* when Genevieve communicates Jacques' love and through his God's love for Christiane. A similar existential witness occurs in *Dot the I* when Aimée communicates God's merciful love to Felicia.<sup>29</sup>

### **Final Reflection on Marcel's Conversation with Nietzsche about Humanity before the Alleged Death of God.**

Aware of Nietzsche's influence in today's world, Marcel studied the development of Nietzsche's thought sympathetically and carefully. In a lecture "Man before the Alleged Death of God," Marcel examined the sense of Nietzsche's declarations of the death of God.

In *Joyful Wisdom*, Bk. III, paragraph 125, Nietzsche portrays a scene of the madman who rushes onto the village square, casts down his lantern shattering it, and cries: "Where is God? *We have killed God*, you and I! All of us, we are God's murderers!...what a terrible deed. How can we console ourselves. . .?"<sup>30</sup> Marcel observed that for the young Nietzsche, God was real, an active presence in his life; so the loss of God is tragic even though out of this loss there is, at first, affirmed the dawn of a new humanism, the advent of a nobler freer humanity and a higher form of morality.<sup>31</sup>

In *Joyful Wisdom*, Book V, paragraph 343 written later in Nietzsche's life, the tone and character of the declaration are quite different. The affirmation of the death of God is now stated as an

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<sup>29</sup>*Two One Act Plays by Gabriel Marcel, Dot the I and The Expertise*, Lanham, MD, University Press of America, 1986, pp. 1-21.

<sup>30</sup>Nietzsche: L'Homme devant la mort de Dieu, in *Presence de Gabriel Marcel, Cahier I*, Paris, Aubier, 1979, p. 9-24.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 10.

empiric fact. The authority for this statement is attributed to the perspicacity and farsightedness of "we other free spirits." The news is announced in the cool confident tone of a scientist who knows that a distant star is extinct even though less enlightened folk still perceive its light and believe in it.<sup>32</sup>

Marcel investigates Heidegger's and others' attempts to make sense of Nietzsche's allegation of the death of God. Noting especially the difference in tone and mood between Nietzsche's first and then later declarations of the death of God, Marcel finds the key to their intelligibility through the process of ageing. On the one hand, ageing can be lived as an active receptivity to renewals of God's presence in our lives, a letting go of non-essentials balanced by a deepening openness to what is essential. Or on the other hand, ageing can be lived as a staling, a kind of sclerosis wherein one stiffens and breaks away from the presence of what was life giving.<sup>33</sup>

The different ways in which one can choose to live the process of ageing, openness or closedness, permeability to mystery or the "hubris" of pride in power, may be recognized as the subjective attitudes that can account for the difference of opinion as to whether God is present and active in one's life or dead, (alleged to be dead). Thus Marcel's analysis lets us see beyond a "groundless relativism" to discern precisely what are the different subjective attitudes that account for various opinions or interpretations. He also shows, in a concrete existential way, through personal witness and critically reflective clarification, how one may proceed to search out and evoke the presence of Transcendence, an Absolute Thou experienced as a living God or as the ultimate recourse in one's life.

Marcel considers what is most significant about the impact of Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God. Today people can the more readily endorse Nietzsche's affirmation as they are caught in the "hubris of technics" that is a striking illustration of the tempter's phrase: *Eritis sicut diis*. However Marcel perceived as the much graver threat the radical pessimism which basically consists of being

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<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 12-22.

convinced, from the very beginning, of the certain failure and final inanity of human enterprises - in short, in that very same nihilism that Nietzsche wanted to overcome without being able to succeed, because the doctrine of the superman and that of eternal recurrence are not, it appears, capable of giving long-lasting satisfaction to a thought anxious to fathom the concrete situation of the human being.<sup>34</sup>

What Nietzsche affirmed with exaltation developed into a radical nihilism. And we note parenthetically what Allan Bloom suggested in *The Closing of the American Mind*, that many American young people, and some older as well, are living fully the consequences of this nihilism whether or not they are aware of its intellectual and historic basis.<sup>35</sup>

Marcel also asked what should be the attitude of people of faith before those who live and declare the death of God. He enumerates some inappropriate and appropriate ways for thinking relations between the one for whom God is a living presence and the one for whom God is not a loving active presence in their lives.

Marcel maintains that one's prime duty is to understand, and he adds that this understanding must necessarily imply self-scrutiny. For what is important is not merely to know that God is living in me, but rather to ask myself to what extent God is living through me. For between the one who insists that God is dead and the one who contests this, a definite relationship will come into being which will be at the same time existential and, to a certain degree, dramatic. So a responsibility lies in part with the person of faith, if the one for whom God is not a presence is to have the opportunity of experiencing the presence of God it will most likely be through the reflection of that presence in the life witness of the one for whom God is a presence,

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<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>35</sup>Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, NY, Simon and Schuster, 1987, pp. 68, 194.

i.e. living and active in their lives.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>"Nietzsche: l'Homme devant la mort de Dieu," in *Presence de Gabriel Marcel, Cahier I*, pp. 23-24.