

# THE AESTHETIC THEORY

## OF GABRIEL MARCEL

Coming home the other evening from an excellent Bach concert, I thought to myself, "Here is something that restores to one a feeling that one might have thought lost, or perhaps something more than a feeling, an assurance: the assurance that it is an honour to be a man." It is important to notice that everything seems to be in alliance to-day to destroy this notion of human honour...What sort of a thing is this "honour" of which the awareness was awakened in me the other night after hearing a few concertos by Bach?...In one sense, no music is more satisfying to the reason than that of Bach, but on the other hand that satisfaction soon transcends itself to become a higher state...Reason,<sup>1</sup>

With this passage from *Man Against Mass Society*, Marcel exposes the unique power of aesthetic experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriel Marcel, Man Against Mass Society, trans by G.S. Frasier, (Chicago: Regnery: 1952), 249-50, 253; "*En rentrant chez moi l'autre soir, après avoir écouté un admirable concert de Bach, je songeais: voilà qui nous restitue un sentiment qu'on pourrait croire perdu, plus qu'un sentiment peut-être, une assurance: l'honneur d'être un homme. Il est important de remarquer que tout semble se coaliser aujourd'hui pour ruiner cette notion...Qu'est-ce que cet honneur dont la conscience se réveillait en moi l'autre soir à l'audition de quelques concertos de Bach?...En un certain sens, il n'y a pas de musique plus satisfaisante pour la raison que celle de Bach, mais il est d'autre part manifeste que cette satisfaction, qui bien vite se dépasse pour devenir exaltation...La raison qui se reconnaît comblée par la musique de Bach se dilate, au contraire, pour accueillir cette lumière-là n'est pas d'une autre essence qu'elle-même*" [Gabriel Marcel, Les Hommes contre L'humain, (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1991), 153,191].

Aesthetics bears moral and ontological implications. Within the context of Marcellian thought, aesthetics plays a crucial role. Aesthetics opens access to the particular and it is only by a rediscovery of the worth of the particular that being can be viewed as full. Beauty feeds and fructifies reason and morality. To paraphrase Plato, the true hides behind the beautiful. Aesthetic experience was especially dear to Marcel. He understood that drama, music and art had the power to make his philosophy concrete, to augment his philosophy by their compensatory otherness: "He [Marcel] wrote his first two plays at the age of eight, and from then on the theatre, because of its 'significant bearing on other existences,' never lost its fascination for him."<sup>2</sup> Marcel, being a playwright, a classical composer and concert pianist, credits drama and music with providing the impetus which drives his philosophical thought. On the one hand, music, especially the work of Mozart and Beethoven, enkindled in him the urge to transcend. Marcel credits music repeatedly: "A musical phrase by Bach or Beethoven--and here I mean almost exclusively the Beethoven of the last period--seems invested with a supreme authority which did not allow of any explanation. One was beyond knowledge and yet it was as if one breathed a certainty which went infinitely beyond the limits of a simple emotion deriving from a particular temperament or sensitivity."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kurt Reinhardt, The Existentialist Revolt, (New York: Ungar Publishing, 1972), 203.

<sup>3</sup> Marcel, The Existential Background of Human Dignity, The William James Lectures at Harvard University, 1961-1962, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 26; cf., "*Telle phrase de Bach ou de la Beethoven -- je vise ici presque exclusivement le Beethoven de la dernière période -- m'apparaissait comme investie d'une autorité souveraine dont aucune explication quelle qu'elle fût ne permettait de rendre compte. On était donc là au-delà de tout savoir et pourtant c'était comme si on*

On the other hand, his plays ground him in the realm of the concrete and the real such that the tendency towards abstraction would not become violent or reductional. Drama and music served heuristic and disciplinary purposes for Marcel. He wrote some years later: "In drama and by means of drama, metaphysical thought seizes itself and determines itself in the concrete."<sup>4</sup> Writing in 1925 about the role of music in Bergson's thought, Marcel would make an observation which would be perfectly applicable to his own mature thought: "Bergson's philosophy...has always been as greatly concerned as that of Aristotle or Comte with maintaining the absolute specificity of various spiritual domains, or modes of experience, and...always looked with discomfort and distrust upon any attempt to *rationalize* these modes and replace them with abstract equivalents."<sup>5</sup>

This paper will analyze the roots of Marcel's aesthetic theory as found in the *Metaphysical Journal* and, also, a short work by Marcel entitled *My Dramatic Work as Viewed by a Philosopher*. Aesthetics is a discourse which serves a shared purpose with religion and value, each discourse supports the insight into being-itself and subtends a substantial basis

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*respirait une certitude qui débordait infiniment les limites d'une simple émotion individuelle tributaire d'un tempérament ou d'une sensibilité particulière*" [Marcel, la dignité humaine, 44-45].

<sup>4</sup> Gabriel Marcel, Positions et approches concrètes du mystère ontologique (in *Le Monde cassé*), (Louvain: E. Nauwelaerts, 1949), 277.

<sup>5</sup> Gabriel Marcel, "Bergsonism and Music," edited by Suzanne K. Langer in Reflection on Art, (Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins Press, 1975), 142-143; cf., "*une philosophie qui a toujours eu le souci de maintenir aussi fortement que celles d'Aristotle ou de Comte la spécificité absolue des divers domaines spirituels, ou, si l'on veut, des modes d'expérience, et qui ne considère pas sans inquiétude, sans défiance, les tentatives qui ont pour objet de rationaliser ces modes, des leur substituer des équivalents abstraits*" [Marcel, "Bergsonisme et musique," Presence, 2-3, 33].

beneath phenomena; each refers to that which is radiant and filled with light for the human person. For Marcel, the aesthetic discourse is something more. In the play between the concreteness of drama and the abstractions of music, one gets a perfect picture of the tension which underlies Marcel's thought. By an investigation of this tension, one is able to attain the deepest insight into Gabriel Marcel as a man and a philosopher.

### *I. Aesthetics in the Metaphysical Journal*

Marcel's philosophy is permeated by a deep aesthetic sensitivity. So much so that Marcel will claim his philosophical works are not comprehensible without taking into account the data of his artistic creations, especially his plays. Aesthetics do not serve a purely auxiliary function in the thought of Marcel. Marcel is a thinker who thinks in images. For him, the True hides behind the beautiful. As he has repeatedly affirmed, one cannot separate the truth from the fine sense of truth in which it is expressed.

Concreteness and particularity, which are central concerns of Marcel, are revealed in aesthetic experiences, "strictly speaking it is aesthetic communication which makes possible the communication of individualities."<sup>6</sup> The known object is, at least to some degree, created by one's love for it. Knowledge is legitimated when it is knowledge for-someone. Let us take the example of the Bach organ concerto. It is only known as real, is only adequately known, when it is known by

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<sup>6</sup> Gabriel Marcel, Metaphysical Journal, trans by Bernard Wall, (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1952), 62, henceforth MJ and JM respectively; "à la rigueur dans la création esthétique qui rend la communion des individus possible" [Gabriel Marcel, Journal Métaphysique, (Paris: Gallimard, 1927), 63].

someone who invests it with power by knowing it. Assurance underlies justification, just as love underlies knowledge.

Moreover, the aesthetic experience is incomprehensible unless it is in some manner an appeal and response: “The *View of Delft* of Vermeer and the *Thirteenth Quartet* of Beethoven cannot be thought of except as responses to a sort of appeal.”<sup>7</sup> It is precisely the distinctness or specificity of the response which establishes a truly metaphysical discourse. Doubtless, this seems ironic, that it is specificity and concreteness which reveal the metaphysical. Yet, this is an essential point. The more that we seek to convert aesthetic experience to the rule of a concept, the more we make of it a vapid abstraction and thereby set ourselves at a distance from the moment of ontological revelation. In order for a work of Vermeer or Beethoven to move one, it is necessary that one respond to these works precisely as one would respond to a call. To clarify even the most basic phenomenological issue, such as that of determining the given, we lack a way of thinking (or perhaps speaking) fluid enough to express these realities. In short, we lack musical forms of thinking. The great works of music, and art as well, have the power “to invoke directly a certain communion.”<sup>8</sup> By works of art, we participate in reality directly. Participation constitutes a form of universality which in no way violates the individual.

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<sup>7</sup> Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society*, 172; cf., “*La Vue de Delft de Ver Meer ou le Treizième Quatuor de Beethoven ne peuvent être pensés que comme de réponses à un certain appel qui d’ailleurs*” [Marcel, *Les hommes contre l’humain*, 106].

<sup>8</sup> Marcel, *Existential Background*, 26; cf., “*un certain ‘nous-tous’ que l’œuvre musicale la plus haute semblait atteindre directement*” [Marcel, *la dignité humaine*, 45].

The human person, most clearly in the example of music, knows as a participant and not as a mere spectator. Suppose one is present at a musical improvisation and one recognizes the improvisation as such. The recognition which occurs in the case of the improvisation is already a kind of participation; that is, it can only take place if I am somehow “on the inside.”<sup>9</sup> Any musician recognizes the truth of this statement. One may simply hear a work of music in a spectator-like fashion. Such a shallow hearing impoverishes the possibility of meaning. An animal hears in such a fashion and possibly is even moved by the hearing, at least, to the extent of being soothed or agitated. A computer might be programmed to copy every note of the improvisation on to its hard drive and play it back without error. Nonetheless, neither dog nor computer grasp the core of the improvisation. Such a “grasping” is only possible for one who can participate in the music from within itself.

"But we can go a step further. It is not inconceivable that the participation contributes in some way to the improvisation itself."<sup>10</sup> In the aesthetic experience, as in the religious and the ethical, the antagonistic opposition of knower and known is cast down. A fundamental issue is at stake here. The musical improvisation can only be known from within its own reality. There is no privileged, disinterestedly scientific way to understand the improvisation. As has already be shown, any utterly *non-involved* description (e.g., the

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<sup>9</sup> Gabriel Marcel, Being and Having, An Existentialist Diary, trans by Katherine Farrer, (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 16-17; “*c’est-à-dire qu’elle ne peut se produire que si en quelque façon je suis à l’intérieur*” [Gabriel Marcel, Être et avoir, (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1991), 19].

<sup>10</sup> Marcel, Being and Having, 17; “*Mais nous pouvons faire un pas de plus. Il n’est pas inconcevable que cette participation contribue en quelque sorte à l’improvisation elle-même*” [Marcel, Être et avoir, 19].

computer reduction to a series of musical notes), no matter how exact, fails to grasp the meaning of the improvisation. This is also the case in the area of philosophical knowledge. Philosophy is more a matter of meditation or contemplation, and less a matter of calculation.

Genuine art always has this metaphysical aura surrounding it: "In this sense genuine art is a revelation."<sup>11</sup> Art provides a physical basis which underlies meaning, in that a work of art is fundamentally unable to explain itself and therefore is freed of all causal determinations. The particular, perhaps for the first time in the history of Western thought is, in the work of Marcel raised to the level of an ontological and metaphysical cipher to being. The concrete particular transcends the chain of causal determinations. In other words, once the question of "what a work of art is" presents itself as a question, seeking an answer, fully explaining the work in some causal or deterministic way, the discussion metathesises like a cancer and meaning withers. What is the *Tocatta and Fugue in D minor* by Bach? Or, what is the *David* by Michelangelo? The first is a series of determinable notes and the second is a particular configuration of marble. However, when one considers these works *as art*, neither of these descriptions is in any way adequate. To set the problem of the nature of a work of art in such terms is to create a problem which is insoluble and "as impossible as that of squaring the circle." The work of art helps to "throw light on what is too abstract in a theory."<sup>12</sup> The work of art drags human attention back down to the level of the particular.

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<sup>11</sup> Marcel, MJ, 79; "En ce sens l'art véritable est une révélation" [Marcel, JM, 79].

<sup>12</sup> Marcel, MJ, 122; cf., "L'exemple de l'œuvre d'art permet ici encore d'éclairer ce que la théorie peut en soi avoir de trop abstrait" [Marcel, JM, 121].

However, the problem with any work of art is: “the more I love it the less I can qualify it, the less the qualification appears adequate for what I experience.”<sup>13</sup> It would be relatively easy for me to describe by qualifications the major chromatic scale that I practiced as a child. I exhaust the scale’s meaning for me precisely because its meaning for me is so shallow. It does not reach the low water mark of a revelation. Yet, if one just slightly scrambles that scale, one is left with the shimmering revelation of Scriabin or, if one drops and flattens a few notes here and there, one is left with the plaintive moaning of a blue Gershwin. How did meaning so incontrovertibly arise from so much mechanistic drudgery? The notes of the scale unfold in utter monotony, until, suddenly, inexplicably meaning shines forth.

E.M. Cioran in his “Notes for a Character Sketch” of Marcel captures well the meaning of music for Marcel:

I often listened to great music with him. Everything from Monteverdi to Fauré and the great Russian masters, and I noticed that music uplifted him, projected him into some other sphere and transported him to a level of being inaccessible to philosophy except in some rare moments of insight. Proust, who should always be quoted in matters of experiences that are revelations, thought that if people had not the faculty of speech, music would have been the only means of communication between souls. This is approximately what Marcel maintained,

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<sup>13</sup> Marcel, MJ, 158; “*De même l’œuvre d’art: plus je l’aime et moins je peux la qualifier, moins toute qualification comme telle me paraît adéquate à ce que j’éprouve*” [Marcel, JM, 157].