

CONCRETE ENCOUNTER WITH EVIL

IN GABRIEL MARCEL'S DRAMA

In an essay entitled "La Rencontre avec le mal," Gabriel Marcel points out that the majority of philosophers who wrote about the subject of evil in the past, with the exception of Kant, with his notion of radical evil, and of Schelling with his research on the essence of human freedom were quite powerless to deal with it, for they substituted the concept of evil for its reality. What they spoke about was, in fact, the "problem of evil." In his essay, Gabriel Marcel proposes to deal instead, with our concrete encounter with evil, that is the mystery of evil.¹

If we recall the distinction which Marcel makes in *Being and Having* between problem and mystery, we can begin to decipher the difference between his approach and that of the philosophers who speak about the "problem of evil." In that work he explains that a problem is something in front of me in which I am not involved. It is something which I objectify, that is, make into an object or into an abstraction. A mystery, on the other hand, is something in which I, as a subject, am concretely involved, together with other subjects. I cannot abstract from it without changing its nature (I, 117).

It is certainly with that distinction in mind that Marcel used to invite those of his students who had presented papers on a particular ethical problem, to proceed to dramatize it, that is to imagine the concrete situation of a particular human being encountering the kind of problem they had discussed in their papers. It was only in this way, he told them, that they could know whether they were speaking about abstract notions or dealing with reality. (VI, 194-195).

Throughout "La Rencontre avec le mal," Gabriel Marcel does exactly what he had suggested to his students. He refers to various dramatic situations of persons encountering evil, and he shows that, in spite of the fact that it is diffuse (coming both from without and from within), and that it is mostly hidden and treacherous, evil is very concrete, and a mystery (VI, 196-7). But, it is in two of his plays, *Le Chemin de*

¹Gabriel Marcel. "La Rencontre avec le mal," in *Pour une essence tragique et son au delà*. (Paris: Plon, 1968):

Crête (II) and *Le Signe de la Croix*, (IV) in both of which evil plays a preponderant role--and which are, of course, dramatisations par excellence, being the dramas of particular human beings involved in real life situations--that Marcel shows most fruitfully and powerfully that evil is a mystery.

Before discussing these two plays, let us mention briefly the ideas which are essential to the understanding of the themes of Marcel's plays. Basically, evil takes place when someone consciously and willfully treats others as objects, no matter on what scale that treatment is. And good takes place when a person relates to others as subjects, intersubjectively, from the lowest to the highest levels attainable. But this intersubjectivity must be grounded in what he calls the "body-as-a-subject."

In his earliest works, the *Metaphysical Journal* and *Being and Having*, in which he constantly decries the nefarious influence of rationalism and idealism, which both cut the cables through which reality is present to me by means of my body, he uses the term "incarnation" (with a small i) and insists that "I am my body," (not "I have a body," which would make it an object, and therefore cut me off from it). He says that it is through my body, when I am one with it, that I feel, or I am aware of all existence, of a presence which subtends all my experience. He calls this feeling an "existential assurance," which constitutes me as a subject and in fact without which I disappear as a subject (V. 211). Later, in *The Mystery of Being*, he speaks of the integrity of the "body-as-a-subject," the fact that it is one with itself, with the surrounding world and with others (IV,114-125). However, reflection and/or socialization, temporarily but inevitably break up my original existential assurance, so that the presence is lost, the integrity is broken, and I, as a subject, all but disappear. Not only does my body then become an object for me, but also do the world and others with whom I come into contact. I also become an object for myself. Thus what Marcel calls "objectification"--the turning of subjects into objects--takes place.

A second reflection can, though, recuperate the lost unity, on a higher level. Marcel speaks of "recollection" as a means of achieving this, and of the essential role of poetry, of music and of course of drama in this endeavor. What has seldom been pointed out is the crucial role of the body-as-a-subject in this second reflection. For it is definitely the ground on which the recovery of the lost unity must be based. Otherwise, the higher level sought is only an abstraction and empty, and a parody of existence. It does not lead to real intersubjectivity, or to creative fidelity (a fidelity which is renewed), but to destructive relationships. As we shall see, this is exactly what happens to Ariane in *Le Chemin de Crête*.

Because she is not one with herself or with her milieu, the higher spirituality she seeks only leads to evil, to her willful (albeit semiconscious) role in the disintegrating of Violette's "existential assurance" and of the break-up of her (Violette's) intersubjective relationships.

But when second reflection is grounded in the body-as-a-subject, and therefore in reality, it is not abstract but concrete and can reach its highest level, what Gabriel Marcel calls a communion of the "tout en tous" (the whole in everyone), and to which he has sometimes referred as the "communion of saints." We shall see that this is what takes place in *Le Signe de la Croix*. Because of Simon's actions, the evil which has visited Tante Léna "changes its nature" and becomes "the evil against which thou hast triumphed." (VI, 211).

In *Le Chemin de Crête*, Ariane first appears as a very spiritual person, in the traditional ascetic sense. She has left her home, and her husband, to seek health and spirituality high up in the mountains, returning only occasionally. She says that she is above everyday life and the pettiness of its ordinary moral conventions. Thus, when she discovers that her husband, Jérôme, has begun a liaison with Violette, a very talented young pianist, she accepts it serenely. And she seems very kind to Violette, offering to take piano lessons from her in order to help her out financially. She even eventually, when Violette's straits become dire, arranges to have a "friend" buy her piano, but "discreetly" hides the fact that it is actually for herself. Violette, on the other hand, at first appears to be an immoral woman. Doesn't she have an illegitimate daughter, and now a liaison with a married man, Ariane's husband?

Yet, as the play unfolds, Ariane's goodness seems more and more questionable. For, she is definitely in bad faith, hiding from Jérôme her knowledge of his liaison with Violette, while befriending Violette and telling her that "she knows", but finds it very natural. In that way she achieves a number of objectives. She can go on manipulating Jérôme (objectifying him), for she remains not only his primary source of income, but his conscience. And she can begin to manipulate Violette's emotions (objectifying them). She can also satisfy her intense curiosity about Jérôme and Violette's relationship. She can, as Violette tells her, "savor with her eyes" Jérôme's and her love for each other "like a fruit which was not given her to taste" (II,350). And she can create a chasm between Violette and Jérôme. For Violette cannot tell him that his wife knows, since Ariane has made Violette promise that she will not tell Jérôme that she (Ariane) knows. This creates a very difficult situation between the two lovers.

Ariane also tries to destroy Jérôme in Violette's eyes by telling her that he is not only a child, a wounded man, but a hidden homosexual. Later, she admits to Violette that her marriage to Jérôme was never consummated, that she was in her own words "frustrated by destiny" (II, 289). And this lack of sexuality between them was a terrible disappointment, which acted in her as "an upside down shadow, as a nocturnal and devastating power" (II, 352).

On the contrary, Violette reveals herself to be a real Marcellian heroine. For she has what Ariane lacks entirely, an "existential assurance," without doubt the fruit of her oneness with her body, magnified by her sensibility as a musician. This assurance gives her what Marcel calls "integrity." It is this integrity which enabled her to reverse Jérôme's impotence, which Ariane had never been able to do. It is also the source of her creative fidelity towards Jérôme. (She tells him: "Haven't you understood that I have given myself to you for always without conditions?" (II, 307). Moreover, it is as the basis of her "disponibilité" to all with whom she enters into contact: Serge, her daughter's father, whom she treats with kindness in spite of the fact that in the past he acted as a cad with her, Monique, her daughter, toward whom she shows infinite care, and even Ariane.

Ariane undoubtedly portrays evil in the way it is described by Gabriel Marcel in "La Rencontre avec le Mal," first menacing and eventually breaking up Violette's integrity in the most diffuse way, not from without but from within. She attacks her in a treacherous, surreptitious way, by making her believe that she only wants her good and that of Jérôme. The end of the play is bleak, for Violette is broken, sceptical, jaded. She has stopped loving Jérôme and given herself to an impresario in order to be able to pay the hospital bills incurred in saving her daughter's very precarious health.

In *Le Signe de la Croix*, evil is not hidden as in *Le Chemin de Crête*. It is very obviously the deportation extermination camps of French Jews by the Nazis. The play is less ambiguous but, in a way, more subtle than *Le Chemin de Crête*. Tante Léna, one of the most important characters, does not have citizenship and will therefore not be able to escape deportation, like her nephews and nieces, who are to seek shelter in the USA. She is the one "visited by evil."

At the beginning of the play, Simon, her nephew-in-law, greatly criticizes his fellow-Jews for setting themselves apart from the French people, and acting cliquish, "like a tribe which refuses to melt into the nation and only speaks about its rights" (V. 171). For he, himself, feels very much one with the French people and is in communion with them.

Yet during the course of the play, in spite of the fact that he has become a Christian (in sentiment), he decides that, in solidarity with the persecuted Jewish people, he will allow himself to be deported to Germany with Tante Léna, to his certain death. For he has been very affected by his son's murder, summarily executed for attending a Bach concert, (forbidden to Jews), while wearing the required star of David. Tante Léna's supremely serene attitude towards her imminent fate has also moved him tremendously, as has the deepening of the bond which unites him with her through the essential role of music in both their lives.

Someone may well ask whether Simon's detachment here is not quite similar to Ariane's and just as negative. Gabriel Marcel answers that question for us in *Being and Having*, with his distinction between the detachment of the spectator and that of the saint (I, 25). According to him, whereas the spectator's detachment, which involves an unhealthy curiosity about the world, is actually a desertion, the detachment of the saint takes place within reality and brings about a deeper participation in it. The first detachment is definitely that of Ariane, whereas the second is obviously that of Simon.

For Simon's detachment is rooted in a presence to reality: his oneness with the French people, his deep suffering at his son's death, and his tremendous admiration for Tante Léna. And it is only after he knows that his wife and his second son can rejoin her brother (who has ample means to support them) in America, that he decides to remain behind and await deportation with Tante Léna. Simon thus enters into communion with a being visited by evil, and through her with the Jewish people, emphasizing through his action that there is hope "only through a we and for a we" (V. 209) (as Gabriel Marcel writes in "La Rencontre avec le Mal.") This "oblation" is indeed a deeper participation in a concrete reality--the extermination of the Jews, the holocaust. By opening himself up "to a vaster and more infinite communion"² Simon changes the nature of evil, which is thus surmounted. For him, the "problem of evil" truly becomes "the mystery of evil."

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²(VI, 211). This participation is no doubt rooted in the "au-delà" perceived by Simon's son, Jean-Paul, and in the "other kingdom" to which Tante Léna says she belongs in *Le Signe de la croix*, p. 167 and p. 199.

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