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BOOK REVIEW

Helen Tattam, *Time in the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2013), 220pp.

Helen Tattam's new study is a very welcome contribution to contemporary Marcel scholarship. As Tattam makes clear from the start, Marcel is "notoriously difficult to situate" and, as a result, he is often overlooked if not sometimes forgotten. In an effort to resist a tendency in Marcel scholarship of striving to be a bit "too neat," her goal is to "present multiple readings" in order to reveal the various shifts and ruptures occurring during the circuitous course of Marcel's development.

Part I is largely concerned with Marcel's relation to Bergson. Marcel attended Bergson's lectures in 1908 and 1909 at the *Collège de France* while completing his *diplôme d études supérieures* at the Sorbonne. Marcel claimed that after hearing Bergson lecture for the first time, he came home and immediately informed his parents that he was going to be a philosopher! Bergson liberated Marcel from the prison of abstraction—something Marcel had detested since the *lycée.* Tattam notes that, for Bergson, "Abstract thinking may be methodologically appropriate for the mathematical sciences, but if philosophy is to have any connection to life, it must root itself in concrete experience in order to avoid missing its subject-matter entirely" (15). In order to combat the reification of experience, both thinkers pursued the possibility of a "non-objectifying act of reflection." Tattam draws the reader into close proximity to the Bergson–Marcel relationship, while adding an interesting twist. Bergson and Marcel eventually part company due to their differing conceptions of reflection: "For Marcel, the purity of Bergsonian reflection is too passive, and therefore too abstract. In order to remain faithful to the reality of human experience…if the faculty of intuition is to be anything more than an abstract construct, it must be implicated in the struggle for existence…which involves the constant temptation to confine our self-knowledge to primary reflection's intellectualizing mode" (27). This recognition led Marcel to an appreciation of *le tragique* —an awareness that would remain throughout the course of his life.

Marcel and Bergson further divide over the possibility of an *eternal present*: "Bergson did not feel the need to argue for an eternal present…For Bergson, the only notion of eternity that is applicable to reality is that of time's movement and change" (32). Marcel, on the other hand, was drawn to a more "immobile conception" of eternity. Their difference comes to the fore when considering their respective views of memory. Bergson emphasized the pure aspect of memory (*le souvenir pur*), functioning like a "directory," or "rolodex file," in which memories are passively stored and may be recalled for future reference. Marcel insists, according to Tattam, that "memory's ontological grounding is in the present rather than the past…Memories are not immanent and carried around in their original form as if they were, in some sense, fixed, eternal 'truths' about the past" (34, 35). Memory is our way of responding to the tragic character of life, experienced as the constant threat of loss or dispersion. Memories "only in so far as they continue to be lived—in spite of the threat of loss—are necessary or eternal to me…implying an interlink with eternity which Bergson would oppose" (37, 38).

Marcel begins with an approach to time best characterized as phenomenological. His "concern is with the way in which the possibilities of (philosophical) affirmation change according to point of view, and thus he is interested in investigating what the process of reflecting on time reveals about reflection itself" (50). Marcel's phenomenological concern with lived experience leads him to the importance of *approaches concrètes* and their capacity to reveal the intersubjective dimension of existence. As Marcel pursues his phenomenological investigations, he begins to tread on ontological ground, according to Tattam,

> In so far as we understand existence as a (mortal, contingent 'thing'…we slide down the *pente de l'existence* toward non-being. However if…we undertake a secondary reflection and are able to appreciate something of Being's (eternal) value and intersubjective presence, then…[this] will allow us to climb the *pente* toward ontological authenticity or *être*. [M]y very mode of being also changes such that I progress, up this *pente*, from mere existence to *être*—Being proper (62).

Tattam's concern is that Marcel comes dangerously close to being seduced by "certain idealist assumptions—especially that of the unity of Being—in spite of the experiential dialectic he discovers as a result of his phenomenological investigations" (66). Marcel's phenomenological analyses "prove inextricably bound" to ontological conclusions. For this reason, Part II begins by engaging the work of Paul Ricoeur in order to show how a robust account of narrative time "bridge[s] the gulf separating phenomenological and cosmological time….Through its constant, creative, and indeed personal mediation of the tension between the phenomenological and the ontological…narrative time both recognizes and (furthermore) renders productive, time's apparent inscrutability" (87). For Ricoeur, narrative identity is "not static, but always in motion. Only by constantly relating difference (over time) to the same (the eternal), and marrying them in the story itself, can narrative introduce a dimension of unity" (95). Marcel's conception of personal identity as an eternal presence riddled by *le tragique* is "homologous" to Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity.

Chapter 4, "Marcel's Theatre: An-Other Time" challenges traditional readings of Marcel's plays, claiming they "fail to consider the plays solely as drama" (122). According to Tattam, Marcel's plays must be given a chance to speak for themselves and be considered "*as plays*—that is, as dramatic, performative works as opposed to philosophical mouthpieces…." (122, emphasis added). Marcel's dramatic characters occupy a liminal dimension where "they experience recurring calls to normativity while faced with the absence of, or contradictions or ambiguities between, norms" (136). Until we are able to consider Marcel's philosophy and theatre *together*—something Tattam believes Marcel ultimately failed to do: "The bipolarity of his work is denied; it defaults on the philosophical—because Marcel seems unable to escape the lure of totalizing narrative, unable to face up to the unsettling instability of time" (145).

The final chapter treats Marcel's conception of eternity and its religious implications. While Marcel was seeking a way, through phenomenology, to admit the transcendent…[s]uch a venture does not conform to traditional phenomenology" (173). For this reason, Marcel has been accused of "hijacking his phenomenology by lapsing into onto-theological dogmatism…which, in effect, give[s] religion the last word" (180, 181). Part of the problem is due to Marcel, whose "frequent appeals to autobiography, and the winding almost associationist character of his philosophy, mak[e] it difficult to determine who he is speaking as" (181). However, "[w]hen

Marcel's philosophy is colored by his personal faith in God or his Catholic allegiances, eternity takes on a theological guise … [in which] the reality of time is subordinated to a more authentic immutable presence" (183).

At this juncture, it may be helpful to revisit a question raised early in the book: "[If Marcel] insists that philosophy engage with the temporality of the here and now, and that it recognize a tragic dialectic in the lived reality of human existence, is he not actually contradicting his project by privileging such an eternal present?" (39).

My sense is that he does not; and Tattam seems to agree when she states "Marcel's discussion of time and eternity stems primarily from the desire to recognize transcendence itself, the significance of which is recovered through temporal phenomenological analysis, not beyond it; for, as linear organized time is rejected as a model for experience, human time becomes less distinguishable from eternity—an eternity that is not atemporal but is rather bound up with time, as the transcendent otherness that shatters the self-sufficient identity of immanence" (183). At other times, however, the author seems to question the coherence of Marcel's overall project (see pp. 145, 183), raising the issue of "[w]hether or not Marcel successfully reconceives philosophy and escapes idealistic totalization" (9). Marcel's thought resembles a hologram: an interactive pattern of light emanating from multiple sources. The reader of *Time in the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* is treated to an up close look at a philosopher "notoriously difficult to situate."

David Rodick *Xavier University*