

BOOK REVIEW

Marcel, Gabriel. *Thirst, or Eager Hearts*, trans. Michial Farmer (Providence, RI.: Cluny, 2021), 212 pp.

Among Gabriel Marcel's many literary contributions, the drama, *Thirst*, has now been translated by Michial Farmer, who has updated the dialogue into language that is present-day. Overall, the translation is an admirable work. The challenge of translation from one language to another requires accuracy: in message, in tone, in reflection of the time period's language, and in portrayal of cultural differences. Written in 1937, before the outbreak of World War II, and set in the Parisian countryside, this play takes the reader/viewer into the inner workings of a French family. The intensity of their communication with each other is heightened by the fact that all of the action takes place in the same room over an indefinite period of time. Each member struggles with his or her familial issues, talks about them, and believes in the righteousness of his or her own personal opinion.

Marcel's attraction to the theme of family life, to an individual's needs and motivations, radiates throughout his theatrical writing. Certainly his father's diplomatic life would have contributed to his understanding of people's needs, demands, and compromises. His musical interests and understanding also appear, as characters in his plays often mention music and composers. In the last act of *Thirst*, Amédée recalls to his family the melody of an art song by Mussogorsky that his first wife used to sing. Mussogorsky wrote the song cycle "Songs and Dances of Death." Marcel's dramas also often reflect either a religious idea or a character that sheds light on an aspect of the intrigue. Such constants as families, musical references, and religious illumination point to a writer of sensibility and culture.

The time of the drama, i.e., the period in which it is set, before the outbreak of World War II, serves as a backdrop and shapes the mood and the attitude of the characters. As the play opens, we encounter Mme. Chartrain, an insensitive, narcissistic character, unmoved by poverty, hardship and illness in others. Madame favors euthanasia in certain situations, not unlike the thinking of Nazi officials at the time. It comes as no shock when later in the play she states that she has seen Hitler up close and found him a charming and reasonable man! Marcel structures the play so that each character's limitations, whether psychological or spiritual, create a challenge to the other. We meet Amédée, his children, Stella and Arnaud, as well as his second wife Eveline. Stella exhibits very fragile mental and physical health. Her father and mother have very different ideas about her path forward and engage in a subtle but relentless tug-of-war regarding control of her future. Stella's brother, Arnaud, is a stable, reflective young man, who encourages others to look into themselves.

In providing headings with lists of characters before the start of each scene, the original French uses the words "Les mêmes," announcing "The same ones," or "The same characters." Farmer uses "The same," providing less precision. Occasionally, the translation could aim for more clarity. For instance, Amédée's insistence on Alain de Puyguerland as the intended bridegroom for Stella, (p. 89) would convey the intended push for Alain over any other suitor with the wording "advocate for it," instead of "vow it."

Marcel does not shy away from giving us clear references to social class. The Parc Monceau has long been known as a park that graces a wealthy Parisian neighborhood (p.51). Mme. de Puyguerland's townhouse is on the nearby Boulevard Miromesnil, which indicates that she is a resident of the upper-class neighborhood. While Amédée longs for Stella's union in marriage with this family, Eveline believes no good will come of it. Enchanted by his longstanding friendship with Mme. de Puyguerland and his deep admiration for her, he wants Alain as part of his own family. Alain is an anxiety-ridden young man who contemplates suicide near a pond. He is tormented by the fear of being conscripted to serve in the war that appears imminent. The pond referenced in *Thirst*, "the pond of the Carmes," calls to mind a similar pond of an earlier play, *The Sandcastle*, in which a pond is found near a Carmelite Monastery. Alain confesses the belief that he will be killed in short order once he is on the battlefield. He feels that marriage to Stella will elevate him in the eyes of his mother and those who know him. Fearing Stella's rejection as well as a prediction made to him about his death, Alain seems on the verge of stepping into the water when Amédée notices him as he is returning home. Amédée's intervention saves Alain from a destructive act.

Much verbal sparring within the Chartrain family, as well as conjectures about the death of Marie-Estelle, Amédée's first wife, casts a shadow over all the characters. Much remains shrouded in mystery. Stella presses to know more about it, while Arnaud takes a more cautious approach. A somber mood prevails. The last scenes very well capture the feeling of a turning point in the drama. Except for Arnaud, given the characters emotional and spiritual bankruptcy, each follows his/her own thinking to its limit, finding only lack and pain. Arnaud, serving as witness and guide, pours a little remedy into his conversation with them, observing that time's progress lessens our powers. While we will come to experience our own weakness, we also see the same in those around us. By turning to the other with compassion and gently seeing to his or her needs, we might purify our ego of its self-righteousness in the living water of sacrificial giving to one another. The waters of purification will thus quench and heal our inward thirst.

The play opens with the remark, "My eyes! My eyes!" and closes with an invitation to see the need in others and work to help them, an invitation to transcendence. An enjoyable translation of very good quality, the play is a welcome contribution to the literature in English on Gabriel Marcel.

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