



Personal Presence

Marcel's Phenomenology of Love

F. Celestine Ryan, O.P.

"Zorba, teach me to dance" says the young man. The camera starts a rising fade-out shot, the strains of santuri music are heard and we are left with the vision of Zorba the Greek introducing his "boss" into a dance on the pebbled beach. Has the "boss" merely decided to expand his cultural experience or is his simple request a consenting to engage life? The latter is obviously the point of the movie. Not only does he consent to life but he is implicitly saying "Zorba, I now accept myself. I have broken out of my shell. I want to love people and the world in which they live." Although our hero has witnessed the savage murder of his first love, the tragic death of Dame Hortense and the failure of his business project, he can still joyfully ask of Zorba "teach me to dance." Although the two comrades must separate, their friendship has been a liberating and creative relationship. Just as in "Fellini 8½" when Marcello takes his wife and joins the circling dance with the rest of the people in his personal existence, so the young man in "Zorba" breaks out of the vicious circle of self and, through the image of the dance, enters the larger, all-embracing circle of life.

This article is not intended to be a movie critic's column but reflection upon "Zorba the Greek" and "8½" seems to reveal an entire phenomenology of love. These two movies contain the basic questions that puzzle so many people today: self-identity, alienation, insincerity; they also express some of the basic answers: acceptance of self, interpersonal relationships, authenticity. The sweeping motion of dialogue which attempts to respond to personal, social, religious and political problems has had its deep effects not only at Vatican II but in the area of social justice, on the college campus and in the effort for "peace on earth." Granting the fact that "Zorba the Greek" and "8½" represent an experiential and artistic expression of today's concern for interpersonal relations, we can now turn our attention to a more thematic consideration of this topic as found in the writings of Gabriel Marcel. Marcel has written no single essay on love and intersubjective relations, yet his writings are interspersed with sections on these themes. What follows, therefore, is a more synthesized pres-

entation of Marcel's views on love as approached by phenomenology, that is, by using the method of descriptive analysis.

Un-Love

One of the most common and effective ways of presenting a human phenomenon is first to describe it negatively, to eat it apart from the false realities with which it could be confused. Marcel does this for us when he presents a critical view of Sartre's notion of the "other" when the "other" appears in my life.¹ Sartre characterizes human relationships, in particular my awareness of another person, through the notion of "being stared at."² This rather severe approach to life gives us as the basic unit of communication not a "seeing" or a "looking" but a "staring" whose effect is to reduce me from the state of *subject* to *object*. Because I fall under the hateful glance of another person my subjectivity and freedom become frozen, and although a glance and hate are not normally synonymous their oneness is absolutized by Sartre. I react to this mode of aggression first by *fear* because my liberty has been threatened, and then by *shame* because another has seen me for what I am.³ Thus, as soon as someone else asserts his subjectivity I lose my identity and my ability to give meaning to the world.

With such an approach to personal relations one is forced to agree with Marcel that human communication in Sartre is consigned to failure. A "we," a community is totally out of the question except in an artificial structure such as an army unit or a team of workers. Love, therefore, is a dead end, a blind alley. It is not the classical notion of "willing good to another" but it consists in the *appropriation* of the other's will, not for the acquisition of power but in order to gain value in the eyes of the beloved.⁴ It is an attempt to overcome the alienating "stare" that had first destroyed my subjectivity. If love is successful then my existence is justified, I am no longer superfluous. But successful love is unattainable since sadism, masochism, indifference and hate are bound to set in. If one admits with Sartre that love is an appropriation then the logical outcome will be that successful appropriation ultimately destroys one's love for the other. For this reason Marcel says that "this dialectic, with its undeniable power and agility, rests upon the complete denial of *we* as subject, that is to say upon the denial of communion."⁵ The essence of human relations, then, is not love and being-together but hatred and conflict.

The Self

Certainly Sartre's description of the hateful stare is an accurate analysis of a reality but hate is not the only mode of human encounter. Similarly, he does present a view of degenerate society but within that society one can find many forms of "we," several manifestations of true co-existence. Self-centeredness and fear of others are apparent characteristics of man's primordial affective state, but as he matures there will normally be a gradual opening of himself to other men and a deeper involvement in human activities.

Marcel points out that the ego and self-centeredness manifest themselves in a rather obvious and aggressive fashion in the child's world.⁶ How familiar is the cry "Mommy, look what *I* did!" Whether the child has engineered a new construction with his building blocks or crayoned a colorful mural on the dining-room wall, his "*I* did it" points himself out as someone worthy of an adult's attention, someone whose exploits are exclusively his own. This attitude remains in the adult in a more or less subdued fashion but he still seeks the admiration and praise of others. And yet the desire for recognition also carries with it the existential factors that *I* could be *overlooked*, *I* could be *slighted* or *mortified*. We see this verified in the classic example of the shy, young man at his first dance or dinner party. He feels self-conscious about his dinner jacket, his bow-tie, the way he smokes and handles his drink. The effects of Sartre's "hateful stare" are present at this fundamental level. The attitude of this young man is characterized by a certain *tension* between himself and others, as well as a *defensiveness* which will ward off any threat to his ego. In general, we can say that the "others" who are present are only "he's" or "she's" and not yet "thou's."

The young man is not really *with* the others; rather he is *alongside* them or *before* them much the way pieces of furniture are beside one another. His self-consciousness creates a circle around him that bars communication and availability.⁸ But suppose a stranger comes along, says a few words to him, sets him at ease, then the tension between the "self" and the "other" begins to relax. Once the ice is broken the two begin to find things in common and a bond is formed. The tense and defensive attitude of the young man is relaxed as he is "lifted out of himself," freed from the restrictions of the here and now. The relationship between this man and his new

acquaintance could hardly be characterized as *love* but a basic transition has taken place which lays the foundation for true interpersonal relations. He has broken with self-centeredness and thereby ceases to be a mere *object*; the stranger has shifted from being a *she* or *he* to a possible *thou*; rather than being *before* one another, they are beginning to *be with* one another.

Attractiveness and Personal Presence

What sort of appeal is there in the other that calls out and says "be with me?" Obviously it can't be a mere listing of predicates, or an ensemble of his or her physical and spiritual qualities. These factors certainly attract, but they fade into the background if one is truly loving.⁹ The call of the other is an appeal of his *total subjectivity* which transcends any describable characteristic. This unique and mysterious encounter of intersubjectivity can be brought out more vividly through Marcel's notions of presence and charm.

The effect of personal presence is quite similar to the reality of intersubjective relations that we have been describing thus far. Basically it is a different angle of approaching the one reality in which we discover the movement from a subject-object relation to one which is subject-subject. The experience of presence is quite common since we know how easy it is to realize the *presence* of someone who is not physically *present*, whether removed by distance or death. In an almost mysterious fashion this very realization of a separated loved-one can take place while other people are quite close to us by physical proximity. Yet their presence is not felt. In this latter case we transmit words to one another and, conversely, receive them. As Marcel puts it: "what we have with this person who is in the room, but somehow not really present to us, is communication without communion: unreal communication in a word."¹¹ The contrary phenomenon of realizing another's presence has the effect of "refreshing my inner being," "revealing me to myself," and becoming "more fully myself" than I was prior to the encounter. This description of feeling *personal presence* brings us to grips with the core of intersubjectivity. The centrality of *personal existence* is brought into sharper focus as the more immediate features, *e.g.*, particular characteristics, assume a more peripheral and secondary role. The attractiveness or charm of the other, therefore, cannot be punched out on an I.B.M. card,

nor can one learn how to make his presence felt by developing attractiveness. As Marcel notes: "the whole notion of teaching charm, as of teaching people to make their presence felt, is the very height of absurdity."¹²

Marcel sees charm as an overflow of *self*, a personal radiation that goes beyond words, gestures or expressions. The correlation between charm and presence become more apparent when we realize that these human dimensions reveal themselves only in a person-to-person situation. That is, they are felt only by *these* specific people in *this* situation of intimacy. Again we are confronted with the primordial distinction that has been emphasized in this article—the distinction between object and subject. Objects have functions; they can be grasped or seized. But a subject's presence is felt, welcomed, gathered to oneself. The very *being* of the "other" is what calls me, and although the call to *be with* the "other" may come through the epiphenomena of words, deeds, gestures and facial expressions, it is his and my total subjectivity that are *present* and ultimately unites us as "I-and-Thou." It is this encounter of personal presence in mutual reciprocation that is authentic love.

Being-With and Creativeness

The appeal of the "other" is his total *being* and the call of his being is for me to *be-with* him; my consent to be-with him results in my *becoming myself* and his *becoming himself*. This is a rather cryptic mode of expressing the notion of love but all the essential elements are here. Having heard the call of the "other" and having made an initial break with my self-centeredness I am in a position to give myself more fully and, by giving to the "other," to receive myself. This startling reciprocation of self-giving takes place because I agree not merely to give you a cigarette or an hour of my time, but I consent to be-for-you. I will your embodied-being-in-the-world which is the only condition in which you can freely be yourself. William Luijpen puts it this way:

As a subject, as another I, as a "selfhood," he freely goes through the world, he makes his history, he goes to meet his destiny. His appeal to me means an invitation to will his subjectivity, to offer him the possibility to exist, to consent to his freedom, to accept, support and share in it.¹³

It is through the sharing of the other's *destiny* that love receives its orientation and horizon. By consenting to be-with the other in the world, I join his quest for happiness and meaning. And my love for the other implies that I am prepared "to open certain worldly roads to him, but also to close others." This I must do without domination or tyrannizing if he is *freely* to realize his destiny. And if this "opening" and "closing" of roads is not accomplished with tact and care then we would witness the disaster of Sartre's self-destructive appropriation. My reply to the other's call is "to be at his disposal," but in accepting this he must see *my* "opening" and "closing" of roads as *his own*. The keystone of love then must be *freedom*.

The focus of love then is the "you," the "other I" beyond all physical, intellectual and moral qualities. The self-giving, the being-towards-the-other is an active force which is creative, for through my love I make the other to be. What do I make him to be? The loving encounter enables the other to actualize his subjectivity, to overcome the barriers in his life, to find meaning and purpose where once there was nothingness and despair. The fundamental effect of love, therefore, is that *I am no longer alone*; we move towards a common destiny *together*.¹⁴ Because mutual love creates a "we," I can discover *myself* and shed the snakeskin of self-centeredness; I can encounter *others* who no longer alienate me with their "stare"; I can find meaning in the *world* which once was hell—and perhaps I can find my God!

Theological Implications

In presenting a phenomenology of love based on the works of Marcel and those of similar approaches, one might be startled to find the word *God* as the last word in our description. A phenomenological analysis of love specifies no one mode whether it be the love of affection, friendship, eros or charity. Yet, the Christian can see the mysterious consequences of an existential treatment of love that is open to life and not doomed to hatred. The believer realizes that the first movement of Love outside Himself was in the creation of the world for man. Man's bodily-being comes from the creative love of the Father and the material world is built around his every need.

After man had severed his primordial bond with Yahweh, he was invited into a Covenant which ultimately issued in the coming to earth of the Father's Son. Through love God brought Jesus to earth

in bodily-being to effect the redemption of man-in-the-world. His is a total self-giving, a call to each man to be-with Him. Through His bodiliness Jesus died, but he also rose and thereby remains unconditionally at the disposal of every man. The encounter with His personal presence in the Church's visibility makes Him accessible to men beyond the limitations of time and space. Through baptism, the eucharist and a life of service the Christian consents to Jesus' call to be-with Him, and in accepting this call, is lifted out of himself to the Father and thereby achieves his destiny.

The love of neighbor that Jesus commanded also takes on a fuller dimension in light of a personalist approach. Friendship and love can only achieve their full meaning in a Christ-context. Beyond the ecclesial sacraments there is also the "sacrament" of the person. Through the free and unconditional love of charity a person can mediate the presence of Christ to another. We can discover the love of Christ in the world through the presence of the "other." Thus, the creativity of love which was described above is the human realization of the first Creative Act of Love. These are but suggested lines of thought that require a more thorough theological development. If we are so disturbed over the problems confronting bodily-man-in-the-world: his relation to self, others and his God; if the Church is seeking her place in the world, then a phenomenological approach to man may offer fruitful possibilities.

Nikos Kazantzakis, the author of "Zorba the Greek," believed that the more humanity was "transubstantiated" in love and freedom, then the more God's Son would be present in the world. "Zorba the Greek," the cinematic matrix of this article so touched the heart of Father Malcolm Boyd that he prayed in this way:

Zorba's dance of life is a wonderful dialogue with you, Jesus. Teach me to dance too, at least to be free with you, and to understand how newness of life and renewal are stronger than death.¹⁵

NOTES

¹ Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, translated by Manya Harari (New York: The Citadel Press, 1956), p. 71.

² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), pp. 252 ff.

³ Marcel, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 74. & Sartre, *op. cit.*, pp. 364 ff.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 76.

⁶ William A. Luijpen, *Existential Phenomenology* (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1960), p. 206.

⁷ Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, Vol. I (Chicago: Regnery, 1960), p. 215.

⁸ Marcel, *Being and Having* (New York: Harper, 1965), p. 105.

⁹ Luijpen, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

¹⁰ Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, Vol. I, pp. 251 ff.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 252.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 253.

¹³ Luijpen, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 229.

¹⁵ Malcolm Boyd, *Are You Running with Me, Jesus?* (New York, Chicago & San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. 80.

HOW TO MASTER YOUR PRIDE

Spiritual Conferences

MATTHEW GASKIN, O.F.M.

Eight conferences by a noted retreat master concern themselves with the nature and kinds of pride, its "whys," and how to master it. Each practical, skillful, inspiring conference lasts about twenty minutes. 33-1/3 RPM. High Fidelity, micro-groove. \$12.50 per album.

Department 4-4376

ST. ANTHONY GUILD PRESS

PATERSON, N. J.