

BOOK REVIEW

Balagna, Christopher and Bellantone, Andrea, eds. *Pour une pensée ouverte. Gabriel Marcel, Jean Wahl et Jean-Paul Sartre entre philosophie et littérature*. Toulouse, France: Les Presses Universitaires de l'Institut Catholique de Toulouse, 2025, 185 pages.

Recent years have seen something of an upsurge of interest in Gabriel Marcel as a dramatist. 2015 saw the publication of perhaps the most comprehensive treatment to date of his plays, in the context of his philosophical works, by Anne-Mary Verdure, in her book *Drame et pensée: la place du théâtre dans l'œuvre de Gabriel Marcel*. The late K.R. Hanley was, of course, at the forefront of introducing English-speaking readers to Marcel's dramatic works, with her influential studies, *Gabriel Marcel's Perspectives on 'The Broken World'* (1998) and *Dramatic Approaches to Creative Fidelity* (2011). Access to Marcel's dramatic works in the Anglosphere was further assisted by the publication in 2019 of *The Invisible Threshold*, a translation by Maria Traub of two of Marcel's plays, while 2025 saw Traub's translation of two dramas of the "darker" years under the title, *Towards Another Kingdom* (both published by St Augustine's Press). Earlier, in 2021, Cluny Press published a translation by Michael Farmer of Marcel's play *La Soif* as *Thirst, or Eager Hearts*.

Nevertheless, it remains comparatively rare to find Marcel the dramatist and Marcel the philosopher discussed in the same breath, as it were, and even less common to come across comparisons between Marcel's plays and the work of other contemporary dramatists. Fortunately, this is beginning to change. A recent example is the publication in 2024 of an article comparing Marcel and Italian dramatist, Luigi Pirandello, by Italian researcher Matilde Ghelardini, whose doctoral research explores the interaction between theatre and philosophy in twentieth-century France, with a primary focus on Marcel but also considering him alongside other dramatist-philosophers, such as Sartre.

The endeavour to view Marcel in the context of broader developments in twentieth-century French philosophy and literature is greatly assisted by the appearance, earlier this year, of the collection under review, which considers Marcel as both philosopher and dramatist, alongside his philosophical and literary contemporaries Jean-Paul Sartre and Jean Wahl. The book, which is published by the Institut Catholique de Toulouse as part of its Humanités series, emerged from a study day organised at ICT in 2023. It includes eight substantive chapters, two of which focus exclusively on Marcel, three on Sartre, and one on Wahl, while another contribution considers the three writers together, and a final chapter provides a more general discussion of the relationship between philosophy and literature. The book is prefaced by a contribution from Barbara Wahl, the daughter of Jean Wahl, which includes a number of short previously unpublished poems by the latter. Helpfully, for those of us whose knowledge of French is less than perfect, each chapter of the book is prefaced by an English translation of its abstract.

One of the two chapters devoted to Marcel is by another Italian doctoral student, Lucia Raffaello Distico, whose contribution examines "the nature of the relationship between philosophy and art, with a particular focus on dramatic art in the thought of Gabriel Marcel" (p.76.). Distico argues that "through its immediate mediation of reality, theater precedes thought, functioning as a laboratory where the creation of meaning intersects with the concrete realities of existence, contributing to the authentic ontological quest of the *homo*

viator” (p.76). Like Hanley’s 1998 book, the chapter explores the connection between Marcel’s dramatic art and his writings on a “philosophy of the concrete.”

The other chapter focusing exclusively on Marcel, by José Manuel Beato from the University of Coimbra, examines the philosopher’s dramatic legacy alongside his engagement with music, both as critic and composer. Beato argues that Marcel’s philosophy was nurtured by a dual artistic experience, allowing the exploration of two dimensions of life and spirit: “On the one hand, the dramatic arts, as privileged expression of existential tension, torn apart by anguish and tragedy, and on the other hand, music, embodying the Marcelian movement of lyrical adherence to life and spirit, under the auspices of love and hope” (p.46). Beato, whose own book on “ontological sentiment” in Marcel’s philosophy was published in Portuguese in 2009, is well-placed to undertake this analysis, being himself a musician as well as a philosopher, and an expert on the French philosopher and musicologist Vladimir Jankélévitch. Appended to the chapter is a useful bibliography of writings in French on Marcel’s dramatic and musical works, including a list of the philosopher’s own reflective writings on those works.

The first chapter of the book, by Martine Cornet, discusses its three subjects together, aiming to show “how, by turning to the novel and the theater, to music or poetry, these three authors have created complex intertextual games with their philosophical texts” (p.22). By returning to what Cornet calls the “old couple of philosophy and literature,” to which Marcel added music and Wahl painting, “they have found a way of announcing for some, and of extending for others, their philosophical positions on Existence” (p.22). The chapter includes extended comparisons of Marcel’s plays with those of Sartre and with the poetry of Wahl, against the background of developments in French philosophy in the “pivotal period” between 1930 and 1960. It builds on the writings of others, such as Paul Ricoeur and Rachel Bepaloff, who have previously highlighted commonalities as well as important differences between the three writers.

Pour une pensée ouverte represents a valuable addition to Marcel studies, and in particular to efforts to re-evaluate his unique contribution not only to philosophy but to modern French literature and the arts. Hopefully, this study will inspire further comparative work considering Marcel in the company of his literary contemporaries and confirming his place as one of the most multifaceted and intriguing figures in twentieth-century French culture.

Martin Robb

The Open University