

A HISTORICAL, LITERARY, AND MUSICAL ANALYSIS OF FRANCIS POULENC'S

DIALOGUES DES CARMÉLITES

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ABSTRACT

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On 17 July 1794, at the height of Maximilien Robespierre's "Reign of Terror" (1793–1794), sixteen Carmelite nuns were guillotined at the Place du Trône in Paris, having been condemned to death by the Revolutionary Tribunal for crimes against the French people. Beginning with Gertrud von Le Fort's 1931 novella *Die Letzte am Schafott*, the account of the Carmelites' martyrdom has since inspired a series of quasi-historical dramatic adaptations, including a film scenario (1947) by Raymond-Léopold Bruckberger with dialogues (1947–1948) by Georges Bernanos, as well as Francis Poulenc's opera *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1953–1956). Although Le Fort, Bernanos, and Poulenc each appropriated some aspects of the historical account in his or her version of the martyrdom, at the heart of each retelling is the fictional story of Blanche de la Force, the progeny of Gertrud von Le Fort's fear-stricken imagination.

In my thesis, I focus on the theme of fear in Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites* and specifically his characterization of Blanche de la Force and her conflicts of fear. I will compare Gertrud von Le Fort's, Georges Bernanos's, and Francis Poulenc's treatment of Blanche and her fear in their respective adaptations of the story of the Carmelites of Compiègne. In particular, I focus on Poulenc's dramatic conception of Blanche as evidenced by his musical portrayal of her character, specific stage directions, and the use of musical motives throughout the opera, with a particular concern for the scenes wherein Blanche's conflicts of fear are most evident. Finally, I explore the political connections in Le Fort's novella and Bernanos's dialogues, contrasting them with Poulenc's comparatively apolitical opera.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1931, German author Gertrud von Le Fort (1876–1971) expressed her fear of the modern threats to Christian virtues in her quasi-historical novella *Die Letzte am Schafott* (The Last at the Scaffold).¹ Inspired in part by the true account of the martyrdom of the Carmelite nuns of Compiègne in 1794, Le Fort’s novella depicts the events leading up to the martyrdom through the story of a young, fearful postulant of her own invention: Blanche de la Force. Recalling the novella’s evolution, and in particular the development of Blanche’s character, Le Fort wrote:

Born of the profound horror of a time in Germany clouded by the shadow of destinies on the march, this character rose up before me as if it were the “Incarnation of man’s anguish faced with an entire era moving inexorably towards its end.”²

Le Fort infused Blanche with a complex confluence of profound fears—fear of the world and the danger of the French Revolution, fear of death and suffering, and fear of the loss of religious faith—resulting in an intricate allegory rich with political and spiritual significance.³

After its publication, *Die Letzte am Schafott* quickly became a literary sensation and subsequently inspired several other works, including Raymond-Léopold Bruckberger’s intended film with dialogues (1947–1948) by Georges Bernanos,⁴ as well as Francis Poulenc’s opera

¹ Gertrud von Le Fort, *Die Letzte am Schafott* (1931; repr., Munich: Ehrenwirth, 1959); English translation by Olga Marx as *The Song at the Scaffold* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1933).

² Gertrud von Le Fort, *Aufzeichnungen und Erinnerungen* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1958), 93–95, quoted in Claude Gendre, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera,” in *Francis Poulenc: Music, Art and Literature*, ed. Sidney Buckland and Myriam Chimènes (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1999), 279.

³ Siglind Bruhn, *Saints in the Limelight: Representations of the Religious Quest on the Post-1945 Stage* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon, 2003), 161; Gendre, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera,” 279.

⁴ Bernanos wrote the text for all the conversations among characters in Bruckberger’s proposed film project. Following the author’s death, Bernanos’s text was published independently as *Dialogues des Carmélites*. In research on Bernanos’s work, scholars have typically opted to leave the French term “*dialogues*” untranslated. According to the Larousse French-English dictionary, verb form “*dialoguer*” has cinematic connotations, and, as Vincent Giroud has insisted, the word could reasonably translate as screenplay. Larousse Online, s.v. “dialogue,”

Dialogues des Carmélites (1953–1956), with text taken from Bernanos’s dialogues.⁵ Both Bernanos’s and Poulenc’s versions of Blanche’s story emphasize Le Fort’s original theme of fear, but both works do so with a more personal approach to the conflict. Bernanos integrated into his dialogues his life-long anxieties and personal confrontation with death, which gave Blanche more human dimensions beyond Le Fort’s allegorical characterization. Poulenc, recognizing Bernanos’s intimately personal and spiritual approach to the text, sought to compose music that would support Bernanos’s intentions, music that, in his words, could identify “absolutely with the Bernanos *spirit*.”⁶

Although several literary scholars, including Joseph Boly, Michel Estève, Monique Gosselin, and Josef Pfeifer, have presented thematic analyses of Bernanos’s dialogues,⁷ previous research on Poulenc’s opera has been predominantly limited to historical research tracing the work’s genesis, as well as musical analyses of Poulenc’s use of leitmotives in the opera.⁸ In this thesis, I will focus on the theme of fear in Poulenc’s *Dialogues des Carmélites* and specifically the composer’s characterization of Blanche de la Force and her conflicts of fear. I will compare Gertrud von Le Fort’s, Georges Bernanos’s, and Francis Poulenc’s treatment of Blanche and her

<http://www.larousse.com/en/dictionaries/english-french/dialogue> (accessed 30 April 2010). Vincent Giroud, “Crises and Renewal in Twentieth-Century French Opera,” *The Yale Review* 98 (2010): 112.

⁵ Georges Bernanos, *Dialogues des Carmélites* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1963); Francis Poulenc, *Dialogues des Carmélites/Dialoghi delle Carmelitane*, text of the drama by Georges Bernanos (Milan: Ricordi, 1957).

⁶ Francis Poulenc to Pierre Bernac, 22 August 1953. Francis Poulenc, *Selected Correspondence 1915–1968*, trans. and ed. Sidney Buckland (London: Victor Gollancz, 1991), 206.

⁷ Joseph Boly, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*”: *Étude et analyse* (Paris: Les Éditions de L’École, 1960); Michel Estève, “Métamorphose d’un thème littéraire a propos des *Dialogues des Carmélites*,” *Études Bernanosiennes* I (1960): 45–74; Monique Gosselin, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: L’Ultime méditation de Bernanos,” *Revue Littéraire Mensuelle* 73 (789–790): 129–139; Josef Pfeifer, “La Passion du Christ et la structure de *Dialogues des Carmélites*,” *La Revue des Lettres Modernes* 81–84 (1963): 141–169.

⁸ See, for example, Claude Gendre, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: Rencontre spirituelle entre Bernanos et Poulenc ou l’esprit de Bernanos et la musique de Poulenc à l’unisson,” in *Centenaire Georges Auric—Francis Poulenc*, ed. Josiane Mas, 175–195 (Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry, 2001); Charles M. Herrold, Jr., “Francis Poulenc’s *Dialogues des Carmélites*: An Historical, Literary, Textual, Musical Analysis” (Master’s thesis, University of Rochester, 1975); Keith W. Daniel, *Francis Poulenc: His Artistic Development and Musical Style* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982), 299–306; Wilifrid Mellers, *Francis Poulenc* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 102–137; Franz Rauhut, “Les motifs musicaux de l’opéra *Dialogues des Carmélites* de Francis Poulenc,” *La revue des lettres modernes* 340–345 (1973): 211–249.

fear in their respective adaptations of the story of the Carmelites of Compiègne. In particular, I will focus on Poulenc's dramatic conception of Blanche as evidenced by his musical portrayal of her character, specific stage directions, and the use of musical motives throughout the opera, with a particular concern for the scenes wherein Blanche's conflicts of fear are most evident (e.g., Act I, scene 1; Act II, scene 4; and Act III, scene 4). Finally, taking into consideration Le Fort's, Bernanos's, and Poulenc's different, though equally intimate connections to their versions of the story, I will explore the political connections in Le Fort's novella and Bernanos's dialogues and contrast them with Poulenc's comparatively apolitical opera. Through an examination of the composer's discriminating elimination of scenes from Bernanos's text, as well as his dramatic and musical treatment of select scenes in the opera, I will demonstrate how Poulenc transformed Bernanos's dialogues into an intimately spiritual drama with deep personal resonance.

CHAPTER I: THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, LITERARY DESTINY,
AND GENESIS OF THE OPERA

On 17 July 1794, at the height of Maximilien Robespierre’s “Reign of Terror” (1793–1794), sixteen Carmelite nuns were guillotined at the Place du Trône (“The Throne Square,” known today as the “Place de la Nation”) in Paris, having been condemned to death by the Revolutionary Tribunal for “crimes against the French people.”¹ Their bodies were disposed of in makeshift burial pits in a former convent garden in Picpus, their severed heads and naked torsos callously tossed into the fetid pit to rest alongside the 1,290 other persons executed at the Place du Trône between 13 June and 27 July 1794.² Although these sixteen Carmelite martyrs were a mere handful of the countless victims of the French Revolution,³ their story in particular, preserved by their surviving sister Marie de l’Incarnation, found a renaissance in contemporary literature.⁴ Beginning with Gertrud von Le Fort’s 1931 novella *Die Letzte am Schafott*, the account of the Carmelites’ martyrdom has since inspired a series of quasi-historical dramatic adaptations, including a film scenario (1947) by Raymond-Léopold Bruckberger with dialogues (1947–1948) by Georges Bernanos, as well as Francis Poulenc’s three-act opera *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1953–1956). Although each artist appropriated some aspects of the historical

¹ William Bush, “The Historical Parisian Martyrdom July 17, 1794,” *Renascence* 48 (1995): 73.

² William Bush, *To Quell the Terror: The Mystery of the Vocation of the Sixteen Carmelites of Compiègne Guillotined July 17, 1794* (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1999), 79, 225.

³ Among the clergy who remained in France during the Revolution, John McManners estimated that between two and five thousand priests were executed and many more were imprisoned during the Terror. In addition, the sixteen Carmelites can be numbered with the dozens of other nuns executed during the Revolution, including the Filles de la Charité of Arras, the Ursulines of Valenciennes, and the thirty-two executed by the Commission d’Orange, as well as countless individual victims. John McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 106–107.

⁴ *Historie des religieuses carmélites de Compiègne, conduits à l’échafaud le 17 juillet 1794. Ouvrage posthume de la soeur Marie de l’Incarnation, Carmélite du même monastère* (Sens chez Thomas Malvin, 1836). Marie de l’Incarnation’s own texts remained unpublished until William Bush published his critical edition of the manuscripts in 1993. Marie de l’Incarnation [François-Geneviève Philippe]. *La Relation du martyre des seize Carmélites de Compiègne. Aux sources de Bernanos et de Gertrud von Le Fort. Manuscrits inédits de Sœur Marie de l’Incarnation* (François-Geneviève Philippe, 1761–1836), ed. William Bush, preface by Guy Gaucher (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1993).

account in his or her version of the martyrdom, at the heart of each retelling is the fictional story of Blanche de la Force, the progeny of Gertrud von Le Fort's fear-stricken imagination.

To begin my study of Francis Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*, I will first relate the true story of the martyrdom of the Carmelites of Compiègne and then trace the Carmelites' account through three of its literary and musical transformations—Gertrud von Le Fort's novella *Die Letzte am Schafott*, Georges Bernanos's dialogues, and Francis Poulenc's opera *Dialogues des Carmélites*. In addition, I will compare the three adaptations with a particular emphasis on the events in each author's life that shaped his or her interpretation of the Carmelites' story, the primary themes in each work, and the differences in the characterization of the primary protagonist, Blanche de la Force, and her fears.

The True Carmelites of Compiègne (1794)

At the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789, the Carmelite community of Compiègne consisted of twenty-one sisters: the Prioress Mother Thérèse de Saint-Augustin (Madame Lidoine), fourteen choir sisters (including Sister Marie de l'Incarnation), and a novice choir sister (Sister Constance), as well as three lay sisters and two externs. At the time, likely none of the twenty-one women could have envisioned the slow destruction of their religious community at the hands of the rising revolutionary powers. And yet, within five years, sixteen of these Carmelites would give their lives as willing martyrs in the hopes of restoring peace to their Church and country.

Beginning in 1789, the Carmelites of Compiègne found their lives of contemplative prayer shattered by the emergent revolution. Almost immediately following the 14 July storming of the Bastille, the National Assembly turned its power against the privileged clergy and

aristocracy of the *ancien régime* and, with the decree of 11 August 1789, abolished feudalism and ended the tithes gathered by the Church.⁵ In subsequent months, the attack on the clergy was only heightened. On 28 October, the Assembly passed a degree calling for a “provisional suspension” of all religious vows, which was followed five days later by the confiscation of all Church property for the government’s benefit, thereby stripping the religious communities of their income.⁶

The definitive blow, however, came on 13 February 1790, when an additional decree withdrew the official recognition of all existing religious vows, forbade the taking of new vows, and dissolved all monasteries and convents not dedicated to educational or charitable work.⁷ Local *départements* and districts were given the responsibility of taking inventory of Church property in April 1790, and four months later, on 4 August 1790, the District Commission of Compiègne’s Revolutionary Directors forced the Carmelites’ cloister to make the required inventory. On 5 August, the directors returned, accompanied by a dozen armed guards, to interrogate the nuns privately concerning their intentions to leave the religious community. None of the eighteen sisters questioned⁸ expressed any desire to leave the convent, and seven fervently professed that they wished only “to live and die” as Carmelites.⁹

With the fall of the monarchy on 10 August 1792, all remaining restraints against open suppression of the Church seemed to disappear. Over the next few days, the National Assembly released its culminant attack on religious orders. On 14 August, a new law required all

⁵ William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 132–133.

⁶ Bush, *To Quell the Terror*, 73; François-Alphonse Aulard, *Christianity and the French Revolution*, trans. Lady Frazer (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1927), 54.

⁷ Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 137; McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church*, 31.

⁸ Sister Constance, the novice, and the two paid externs—the community’s nonprofessed—were excluded from the directors’ interrogations.

⁹ Declaration of the Carmelites to the District authorities. Departmental Archives of the Oise, Series Q: “Fonds des Domaines Nationaux”; quoted in Claude Gendre, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera,” 276.

Frenchmen receiving a government pension—notably including most, if not all, of the professed religious community—to pronounce the revised *Liberté-Egalité* oath.¹⁰ Those who refused were deported, thus making religious orders completely subject to the government’s will. Three days later, on 17 August, all religious houses were ordered to evacuate, fulfilling the 4 August 1792 decree to close all women’s convents.¹¹ Over the subsequent days, all monks and nuns were expelled from their monasteries and convents and were required to dress in civilian clothing and forgo living openly as religious communals. In September, less than a week after the last of the September massacres, the Carmelites of Compiègne faced the same fate. The convent’s possessions were confiscated on 12 September, and the nuns themselves were forced to leave two days later.¹² Although expressly forbidden from living together, upon leaving their convent the Carmelites divided into four unequal groups or “associations,” each lodged in a separate apartment in the neighborhood of Saint Antoine’s parish church where the nuns attended daily services conducted by their chaplain, Abbé Courouble.¹³ On 19 September, in an act authorized by the Carmelites’ superior in Paris, they took the *Liberté-Egalité* oath required to qualify for receiving government pensions.

It is at this point—sometime between the Carmelites’ expulsion on 14 September and 27 November—that the Prioress proposed “an act of consecration whereby the community would offer itself as a sacrifice that the ills afflicting the Church and our unhappy kingdom might cease.”¹⁴ Although, ultimately, all of the Carmelite nuns accepted this vow, Madame Lidoine did not reveal her proposal to the community as a whole at first, nor was the immediate response by

¹⁰ McManners, *The French Revolution and the Church*, 65.

¹¹ Bush, *To Quell the Terror*, 89–90.

¹² Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 191–192; Bush, *To Quell the Terror*, 91–92.

¹³ Bush, *To Quell the Terror*, 97–98.

¹⁴ “[Il lui vint en pensée le projet d’un acte de consécration particulière, par lequel] la Communauté s’offrirait [en holocauste pour] la cessation des maux qui désolaient l’Église et notre malheureux royaume.” Marie de l’Incarnation, *La Relation du martyre des seize Carmélites de Compiègne*, Manuscript I, 82. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. See also Manuscripts II, 123, and III, 224, in the same volume.

her initial confidants particularly encouraging. She first approached only the four choir nuns residing in her apartment, which housed the three most senior members of their community, as well as Sister Marie de l'Incarnation. In reconstructing this fateful meeting, Bernanos scholar and theologian William Bush speculated,

Only 38 years of age at the time, the young Madame Lidoine perhaps hoped that the community's two 76-year-old "jubilarians,"¹⁵ Madame Thouret and Madame Piedcourt, would have words of wisdom in regard to this matter. . . . She was sorely disappointed. The horror of the two seniors at offering themselves to die on the new-fangled guillotine, inaugurated just the previous April, was such that they could not even speak of what was meant. "My dear Mother, do you mean . . . ?" they began, then paused, unable to continue before withdrawing together to the room they shared in the prioress' apartment.¹⁶

Startled by the nuns' reaction to her proposed act of consecration, Madame Lidoine apparently repented of her proposition, at least until Mesdames Thouret and Piedcourt returned that evening to plead with their Prioress for forgiveness for their lack of courage and to ask permission to join with her in taking the vow. Madame Lidoine subsequently approached the nuns in the other three "associations," and although their immediate reactions are not known, the entire community did at some point accept their Prioress's proposal and began daily recitation of the act of consecration as drawn up by Madame Lidoine.¹⁷ Furthermore, in anticipation of their presumed demise under the blade of the guillotine, the Prioress had her daughters prepare physically by trimming away the monastic headcovering of their normal habits up to their ears. This alteration left the nuns with only a vestigial white skullcap, thus completely exposing their necks as would be required at the final moments. Though it cannot be known for certain, William Bush hypothesized that this operation may have been carried out in conjunction with the Carmelites'

¹⁵ The word implies that Mesdames Piedcourt and Thouret had both celebrated 50 years, or a "jubilee," of service in their religious profession.

¹⁶ Bush, "The Historical Parisian Martyrdom July 17, 1794," 68; see also Marie de l'Incarnation, *La Relation du martyre des seize Carmélites*, Manuscript III, 222–224.

¹⁷ Bush, *To Quell the Terror*, 108.

daily act of consecration, “to remind each of them daily, and particularly as the act of consecration was repeated, that the executioner’s ‘last toilette’¹⁸ had already been carried out. Each of them had been readied for blood witness.”¹⁹

Despite the Carmelites’ willingness to consecrate themselves daily for holocaust to the Lord for almost two years, lingering fears of death continued to plague at least some of the nuns. Abbé de Lamarche recalled coaching Sister Constance, the still unprofessed young novice,²⁰ during his clandestine ministry in Compiègne to help her overcome her fear of the guillotine.²¹ Although she insisted that she was no longer afraid of facing the guillotine, her fears returned at her first sight of the dreaded machine. Upon being brought before the scaffold, Abbé de Lamarche reported, Sister Constance was again panic-stricken and accused herself to her Prioress of not being ready yet since she had not yet finished saying her office.²² But Sister Constance was not alone in her fear of the guillotine. Marie de l’Incarnation described how the mere mention of the word “guillotine” caused one sister, Madame Crétien de Neuville, to tremble all over.²³ Moreover, one of the externs, Teresa Soiron, fainted when the Revolutionary Tribunal pronounced the Carmelites’ fateful sentence. Residing underneath the Carmelites’ religious poise was a layer of poignant fear, such as that expressed in the third stanza of the *Marseillaise* parody Madame Crétien de Neuville composed during the Carmelites’ brief tenure in the Compiègne prison just prior to their execution:

Great God who seest all my weaknesses

¹⁸ That is, cutting short the victim’s hair and trimming away collars or anything else that might impede the immediate impact of the guillotine blade on the victim’s neck.

¹⁹ Bush, *To Quell the Terror*, 163–164.

²⁰ Although Sister Constance had planned to take her final vows on 15 December 1789, the revolutionary decree forbidding the further taking of religious vows prevented this. Thus, she went to the scaffold as a novice after six years with the community. Bush, *To Quell the Terror*, 68–69.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 71–72.

²² Bush, “The Historical Parisian Martyrdom July 17, 1794,” 62; see also Bruno de Jésus-Marie, *Le sang du Carmel ou la véritable passion des seize Carmélites de Compiègne* (Paris: Cerf, 1992), 480–481.

²³ Marie de l’Incarnation, *La Relation du martyre des seize Carmélites*, Manuscript I, 110.

Although I'm eager, still I fear.
 Confidently ardor now guides me,
 O do thou lend thine aid and be near!
 I can't hide from thine eyes my poor heart,
 Thinking that it's with death I must pay.
 Be thou my comfort, be my stay,
 And I'll say, come, let's make our start!
 Hasten now the sacrifice!
 Thou canst change me in a trice!
 O Lord, O Lord, with no delay,
 To my heart give joy today.²⁴

On 21 June 1794, armed guards seized and searched the Carmelites' apartments in Compiègne. The next day, all sixteen of the remaining members of the community were arrested and taken to a makeshift revolutionary prison in the former convent of the Visitation.²⁵ There they met seventeen English Benedictine nuns who had been arrested as foreigners in their monastery in Cambrai in September 1792 and detained at the Compiègne prison ever since. Compared to the Benedictines' lengthy imprisonment, however, the Carmelites' stay would be relatively brief. On the morning of 12 July 1794, after only twenty-one days in the prison, the mayor of Compiègne received an order from the Revolutionary Tribunal to transfer the Carmelites to Paris for their trial and execution. Acting immediately, he made preparations for the nuns' departure that very morning, apparently forgetting that the nuns' only change of civilian clothing, per his express permission, was at that moment soaking in the prison

²⁴ "Grand Dieu, qui voyez ma faiblesse, / Je désire et je crains toujours. / Confidemment l'ardeur me presse: / Mais donnez-moi votre secours. (Bis.) / Je ne puis vous cacher ma crainte / Pensant aux prisons, à la mort. / Soyez, vous seul, mon réconfort: / Je le dis, non plus de contrainte. / Hâtez donc le moment; / J'attends mon changement, / Seigneur, Seigneur, sans différer / Rendez mon cœur content." Marie de l'Incarnation, *La Relation du martyre des seize Carmélites*, Manuscript I, 112. English poetic translation by William Bush, quoted in Bush, *To Quell the Terror*, 36–37.

²⁵ One of the original twenty-one Carmelites residing in the Compiègne convent in 1789 had died in 1791. Four others had joined in the act of consecration along with their sisters but escaped martyrdom themselves. One nun had died in 1792, shortly after taking the vow, and two had left the community in 1794 to return to their families. As we have seen, Sister Marie de l'Incarnation was also spared the guillotine; she was in Paris at the time of the nuns' arrest on personal business and survived to compose her firsthand account of the Carmelites' martyrdom. Gendre, "Dialogues des Carmélites: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera," 276.

washtubs.²⁶ Thus, despite laws prohibiting the wearing of religious clothing in public, the Carmelites were obliged to leave for Paris and consequently face their trial and execution, all while wearing the forbidden habits.

The Carmelites arrived at the Conciergerie on 13 July 1794. After four days in that prison—during which time Madame Crétien de Neuville composed her poignant hymn—the Carmelites were brought before the Revolutionary Tribunal of Antoine Fouquier-Tinville for trial.²⁷ Their trial, Bush relates, was a paltry charade: “As all the trials before the Revolutionary Tribunal, [it] served only to reassure the naïve that the executions were legal.”²⁸ By the time the so-called trial began, the records had already been written, the printed condemnation of the Carmelites by the Tribunal had already been signed, and Fouquier-Tinville had already informed the executioner of the number of victims to expect at the guillotine later that day: a “batch” of forty, which included the sixteen Carmelites.²⁹ Nonetheless, a trial was held—with neither lawyers, witnesses, nor the presentation of evidence, of course—and the sixteen Carmelite nuns were condemned for “crimes against the French people.” They were accused of being, according to the official Act of Accusation,

seditious persons who nourished in their hearts the desire and criminal hope of seeing the French people put back into the irons of its tyrants and the slavery of priests whose thirst for blood equals their deception, and also of seeing freedom swallowed up in torrents of blood, which their vile conspiracy has spilled in the name of heaven.³⁰

²⁶ Bush, *To Quell the Terror*, 164–169.

²⁷ For a thorough account of the Carmelites’ trial, see Bush, “Enemies of the People,” in *To Quell the Terror*, 175–198. Additionally, countless documents pertaining to the Carmelites’ trial and execution are reproduced in Bruno de Jésus-Marie, *Le sang du Carmel*.

²⁸ Bush, “The Historical Parisian Martyrdom July 17, 1794,” 73.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ “Elles n’offrent qu’une réunion, un rassemblement de rebelles, de séditieuses qui nourrissent dans leurs coeurs le désir et l’espoir criminel de voir le peuple français remis aux fers de ses tyrans et dans l’esclavage des prêtres sanguinaires autant qu’imposteurs, et de voir la liberté engloutie dans des flots de sang que leurs infâmes machinations ont fait répandre au nom du ciel.” Reprinted in Bruno de Jésus-Marie, *Le sang du Carmel*, 435.

Fouquier-Tinville labeled them “fanatics.” When asked by one of the nuns to explain his use of the term, he replied, “I mean your stupid religious practices.”³¹

The execution was carried out that evening. The Carmelites, though spared the executioner’s “last toilet” thanks to their earlier preparations, were nonetheless exhausted from the events of the day. They had arisen at dawn after little or no sleep and had been forced to endure endless waiting in corridors and stairways on their way to trial without food or drink. Already one sister, Teresa Soiron, had fainted, and Madame Lidoine was concerned that the two-mile trip to the guillotine in rough, bumpy carts through the sweltering July heat would prove too much for her daughters. Moreover, she feared that any sign of physical weakness during the ordeal would be taken as a lack of spiritual or moral virtue. After consultation with the subprioress, Madame Brideau, the two nuns agreed to barter a fur piece for sixteen cups of chocolate.³² After this brief final repast, the Carmelites were herded into the tumbrels to be taken to the Vincennes gate on the edge of the Paris city limits.

As the procession advanced, the nuns began chanting, first the *Miserere*, followed by the Vespers and Compline, as well as the Office of the Dead, the *Salve Regina*, and, as they finally approached the Place du Trône, the *Te Deum*.³³ Disguised priests, hidden among the crowds en route to the execution, blessed them.³⁴ Upon their arrival at the guillotine, Madame Lidoine received permission from the executioner to carry out the last devotions of a dying Carmelite, and, with the *Veni Creator Spiritus*, the nuns renewed their vows.

The youngest, Sister Constance, was called first. Despite her initial weakness, Sister Constance faced the machine with confidence. As she started up the steps, she intoned the first

³¹ “J’entends . . . votre attachement à des croyances puérides, vos sottises pratiques de religion.” Marie de l’Incarnation, *La Relation du martyre des seize Carmélites*, Manuscript II, 167.

³² Bush, *To Quell the Terror*, 196–197.

³³ *Ibid.*, 201–203.

³⁴ Gendre, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera,” 277.

line of the psalm *Laudate Dominum omnes gentes*, and was soon joined by her waiting sisters. Once upon the scaffold, Sister Constance reportedly “waved aside the executioner and his valets that she might, of herself, approach the vertical balance plank to which they immediately strapped her.”³⁵ One by one, the other sisters followed Sister Constance’s steps up to the guillotine, their voices diminishing with each decapitation until the Prioress alone was left singing. And then, silence. Ten days later, Robespierre fell and the Great Terror was over.

Die Letzte am Schafott (1931) by Gertrud von Le Fort

Despite Marie de l’Incarnation’s account of the Carmelites’ courageous martyrdom, as well as the nuns’ Beatification on 27 May 1906, the story of the sixteen Carmelite martyrs did not attain worldwide attention until it became the literary inspiration for Gertrud von Le Fort’s 1931 novella *Die Letzte am Schafott*. Le Fort (1876–1971) was a German writer of Huguenot descent and a scholar of religion, world history, and philosophy.³⁶ Her deep-set Christian faith inspired her writings and infused them with a religious poignancy that spanned her conversion to Catholicism in 1926. As she stated in a series of postwar lectures in Switzerland and Germany,

The special experience of modern man is a profound horror of the threat that all that is good, all that has seemed our safe possession for centuries will be ruined. As a result of this horror, modern man, as hostile as he is towards Christ, is nonetheless turning his face toward the mystery of Christ, even if unconsciously and involuntarily.

The transformation of destruction and annihilation into sacrifices of love and hope—that is what I tried to express in my books. I consider this to be the fate of Europe, of our culture, and of our religion. . . . World history offers a consolation to me, a vivid consolation: for the poet nothing is past, but only transformed; it is re-awakened to its own life.³⁷

³⁵ Bush, “The Historical Parisian Martyrdom July 17, 1794,” 78.

³⁶ Eleonore von la Chevallerie, “Gertrud von Le Fort and the Fear of Blanche de La Force,” *Renascence* 48 (1995): 12.

³⁷ Gertrud von Le Fort, unpublished lectures, quoted in La Chevallerie, “Gertrud von Le Fort and the Fear of Blanche de La Force,” 12.

In 1920s Germany, Le Fort witnessed first-hand many of these “profound horrors,” these threats to Christian and human values that, she hoped, would turn modern man to Christ. In 1922, Le Fort was shocked by her first exposure to the Nazi party: a poster in Munich boldly touting the slogan “*Jude, verrecke!*” (Croak, you Jew!).³⁸ Sometime later, Le Fort noted, “I saw posters and slogans against the Jews everywhere. I had the premonition that a terrible time was ahead and I could not imagine how we would overcome it.”³⁹ Throughout the late 1920s, she became increasingly aware of the mounting threats to Europe and eventually turned to literary expression in order to articulate her profound fears. Thus emerged the timorous character of Blanche.⁴⁰

In her preliminary sketches of the novella, Le Fort attempted several settings for her frightened young heroine, including various historical and present-day situations.⁴¹ By mere coincidence, however, she happened upon the story of the sixteen Carmelite martyrs and was transfixed. Describing the evolution of her novella in her memoirs, Le Fort wrote,

The point of departure for my own creation was not primarily the destiny of the sixteen Carmelites of Compiègne, but rather the character of little Blanche. In an historical sense, she did not exist, but received the breath of her trembling being directly from my own personality, and thus can never be separated from that origin which is hers and hers alone. Born of the profound horror of a time in Germany clouded by the shadow of destinies on the march, this character rose up before me as if it were the “incarnation of man’s anguish faced with an entire era moving inexorably towards its end.” This child in perpetual anguish, known familiarly as the “little hare,” this young woman who, for fear of the world, goes into a convent and there tries, mystically, to meld her religious life to the Agony of Christ, already existed in sketches found in my literary compositions well before her destiny was joined to that of the sixteen Carmelites of Compiègne. It was purely by chance that the latter became known to me. A little note, found at

³⁸ La Chevallerie, “Gertrud von Le Fort and the Fear of Blanche de La Force,” 12.

³⁹ Margret Huda, “Begegnung mit Gertrud von Le Fort,” *Der Brunnen* 3 (Marz 1965): 8, quoted in Claude Gendre, “The Literary Destiny of the Sixteen Carmelite Martyrs of Compiègne and the Role of Emmet Lavery,” *Renascence* 48 (1995): 38.

⁴⁰ Eleonore von La Chevallerie noted that Le Fort’s choice of name for this character—Blanche—might have come from the German expression for “naked fear,” “*blanke Angst*.” La Chevallerie, “Gertrud von Le Fort and the Fear of Blanche de La Force,” 13.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

the bottom of a page of a book devoted to Catholic orders, told of the Carmelites who sang as they went to the scaffold. It was this that made me decide to transpose Blanche's story from the present to the time of the French Revolution.⁴²

While writing the novella, Gertrud von Le Fort consulted historical sources at the Munich Municipal Library, which likely included Marie de l'Incarnation's (Françoise-Geneviève Philippe) *Historie des religieuses carmélites de Compiègne, conduits à l'échafaud le 17 juillet 1794*.⁴³ Le Fort borrowed four real-life characters from her research for her fictional version of the Carmelites' story—Mother Thérèse Lidoine, Henriette de Croissy, Marie de l'Incarnation, and Sister Constance—as well as certain details from the historical account, such as the decree suppressing the taking of religious vows; the inventory of the convent taken by the District Commission; the act of consecration, or so-called “vow of martyrdom”; and the arrest, condemnation, and heroic death of the Carmelites, who sang as they mounted the scaffold.⁴⁴

Despite the historical basis for many of the novella's focal events, Gertrud von Le Fort still took great liberties in creating her story. Her characters departed significantly from the descriptions of the real-life protagonists that she had uncovered in Marie de l'Incarnation's memoirs and other historical sources. For example, early in Le Fort's novella, the former Prioress Madame Henriette de Croissy expires in excruciating agony in her bed in the Compiègne convent, whereas in reality, she died heroically with her sisters at the guillotine. Additionally, Le Fort depicts Mother Thérèse Lidoine, the Prioress at the time of the Carmelites' execution, as somewhat self-effacing and weak, particularly in contrast to the overpowering

⁴² Le Fort, *Aufzeichnungen und Erinnerungen*, 93–95, quoted in Gendre, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera,” 279.

⁴³ Eleonore Von le Chevallerie indicated that Le Fort used, in addition to Marie de l'Incarnation's history, Hippolyte Taine's *L'Histoire de la révolution française* and Jean François de La Harpe's *La prophétie de Cazotte*. La Chevallerie, “Gertrud von Le Fort and the Fear of Blanche de La Force,” 13. In a 19 April 1962 letter to Claude Gendre, however, the Director of the State Library of Bavaria insisted, “It is impossible today to establish which books Gertrud von le Fort borrowed.” Gendre, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera,” 312.

⁴⁴ See Gendre, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera,” 282, for a more thorough list.

Marie de l'Incarnation, whom Le Fort transformed from a young novice into a noble, strong-willed leader in the religious community and instigator of the "vow of martyrdom."⁴⁵ But it is the fictional Blanche de la Force, the complex personification of the author's own profound fear, who captures Le Fort's "retelling" of the Carmelites' martyrdom.

Le Fort's novella is conceived as a letter from a certain Monsieur de Villeroi in Paris, to his "dear friend," a noblewoman living in exile in Germany. In this letter, ostensibly dated October 1794, Villeroi relates details concerning the touching sacrifice of the sixteen Carmelite nuns and in particular the young novice Blanche de la Force, who approached the guillotine with extraordinary, even mystic courage.

According to de Villeroi's narrative account, the fictional Blanche de la Force began her life under somewhat inauspicious circumstances. She was born prematurely on the day of Louis XVI's marriage to Marie-Antoinette in 1774 after her pregnant mother was forcefully dragged from her carriage into a chaotic and fearful crowd, which de Villeroi described as "a mass of human beings stifled by their own terror."⁴⁶ A few hours later, the Marquise de la Force went into premature labor. Being in a weakened state because of her terrible experiences at the hands of the merciless crowd, she died in childbirth. Thus Blanche, "thrust into the world too soon through the fright of her mother," became fated to a life of near constant fear.⁴⁷

As a child, Blanche displayed a great timidity that extended beyond rational childhood fears. "It seemed as if this pathetic little person lived in constant expectation of some shocking event," the narrator explained—a dog barking, a new servant, a dark niche, a collapsing wall, or

⁴⁵ Only thirty-two at the time of her sisters' martyrdom, Marie de l'Incarnation was almost the youngest professed nun in the religious community, second only to Constance. Moreover, William Bush hypothesized that she may have been one of the weaker sisters. For a description of Marie de l'Incarnation's profession as a Carmelite, see Bush, *To Quell the Terror*, 64–66.

⁴⁶ Gertrud von Le Fort, *The Song at the Scaffold*, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1933), 8.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

angering others—“or as if the great fear in her childish gaze penetrated the firm exterior of a sheltered life to a core of terrible frailty.”⁴⁸ Gradually, she came to fear her own fear and devised ways of hiding her concerns, through sudden spells of illness or exhaustion, for example. Under her governess’s tutelage, however, Blanche was advised to find protection and courage in religion, and that she did. At sixteen, Blanche expressed her intention to enter the Carmelite Order. Although her father viewed this plan as a cowardly escape, “a bridge by which the child could conveniently quit this world,” he gave his consent and allowed Blanche to enter the convent, where she soon became “a satisfactory postulant,” “amiable, eager, obedient, and . . . happy.”⁴⁹

Her fears returned, however, upon the painful death of the Prioress, Madame de Croissy. Blanche, “bewildered and shocked . . . that God [would permit] so holy a woman to suffer so,” exhibited such distress that the Novice Mistress, Sister Marie de l’Incarnation, postponed Blanche’s investiture—at least, until revolutionary events intervened. Blanche was ultimately permitted to take her vows when the Carmelites’ superior, Monseigneur Rigaud, “advised the immediate investiture of postulants,” including the timorous Blanche, due to a then pending law that was aimed at the complete suppression of religious orders.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Monseigneur Rigaud recommended that these postulants be given the name of “*Jésus au Jardin de l’Agonie*” (Jesus in the Garden of Agony) in consideration for the tenuous circumstances pervading their country.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 21.

For a time, Blanche showed decided progress in overcoming her mortal fears. But it was not to last. Presumably six to ten months later,⁵¹ the Revolutionary Commission forced its way into the convent in order to interview individual Sisters with the hope of finding “victim[s] of religion” who wished to leave their supposedly forced exile from the world.⁵² At the mere sight of one of the members of the Commission approaching her cell, Blanche “uttered a piercing scream” and then became “so terror-stricken that she could not reply” to the commissioner’s inquiries.⁵³ Following this episode, Blanche deteriorated, even to the point of a nervous breakdown, while her sisters garnered zeal in the face of an increasingly certain martyrdom. On Christmas, Blanche’s terror was further compounded when she, frightened by the wild strains of the *Carmagnole* rising from the streets, dropped the convent’s beloved statue of the infant Jesus (*le Petit Roi de Glorie*) on the cold, stone floor of her cell. “Oh, *le Petit Roi* is dead,” she cried. “Now there is only the living Christ!”⁵⁴ The despair must have been too much for the young novice, and from this point on, the narrator notes, “Blanche suddenly gave the impression that she was no longer struggling against her condition as before.”⁵⁵

In the following days, Marie de l’Incarnation and the Prioress, Madame Lidoine, became increasingly concerned about the young postulant. After some discussion of her deteriorating weakness, the Prioress sought a private conversation with the novice, during which she urged Blanche to return to the world. Although she remained silent, Blanche’s inner torture was evident. Somewhat confused, Madame Lidoine searched the young novice’s face:

⁵¹ Le Fort based many of the details of her novella on historical facts gathered from her research on the Carmelite martyrdom. Thus, one can presume that the fictional Blanche de la Force took her vows immediately before either the 29 October 1789 decree, which called for the temporary suspension of religious vows, or the 13 February 1790 decree, which made the temporary suspension permanent. The Carmelites’ convent was searched on 4 August 1790.

⁵² Le Fort, *The Song at the Scaffold*, 34–37.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Blanche dropped her hands from her small tortured face that held only a single expression of endless depths. The Prioress hardly recognized her. A series of quite unconnected images suddenly floated before her: little dying birds, wounded soldiers on the battle field, criminals at the gallows. She seemed to see not Blanche's fear alone but all the fear in the world.

"My child," she said brokenly, "you cannot possibly harbor within yourself the fear of the whole universe—"⁵⁶

Notwithstanding such profound fear, however, Blanche insisted that her desire was to remain in Carmel, and so she remained, despite Madame Lidoine's—not to mention Marie de l'Incarnation's—persisting doubts.

Shortly thereafter, Marie de l'Incarnation proposed the fateful vow:

Permit us, Reverend Mother, in this struggle for the rights of the Church to offer it whatever help God allows us to give . . . by offering the Majesty of God our own lives for the preservation of His threatened Church in France.⁵⁷

Although, our narrator reassures, "such acts of consecration were entirely in keeping with the principles of a Carmelite convent," the Prioress hesitated, clearly thinking of her weaker daughters.⁵⁸ Mother Marie was not so easily deterred, however, and at Madame Lidoine's temporary absence, she once again proposed the vow of martyrdom. Despite her obvious weakness, Blanche joined with her sisters out of loyalty, her singular terror-stricken face standing out among those "seized by a great oppressive happiness" at the prospect of offering their lives for France.⁵⁹ The act proved too much for the fearful Blanche, and she fled the convent shortly after pronouncing the vow while her sisters rose to take Communion. Thus it followed that Blanche was absent when the convent was searched and the nuns arrested. Despite her vow, Blanche did not go with her sisters to the guillotine, did not join with them in singing the *Salve Regina* and the first lines of the *Veni Creator* on their way to the scaffold. Remarkably,

⁵⁶ Ibid., 57.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 77.

there was one other missing. Marie de l'Incarnation, the zealous instigator of the nuns' vow, was fatefully absent at the Carmelites' arrest, being in Paris herself on business concerning her state pension.

But Blanche's story does not end there. Upon fleeing the convent, Blanche became a witness to the increasingly gruesome nature of the Revolution. In Paris, she watched as her father was brutally killed by revolutionaries in a mob of violence. As if that alone was not enough, she was then forced to drink from a cup holding the blood of aristocrats in emulation of the historical account of Mademoiselle de Sombreuil. Entirely overcome by the experience, Blanche fell into a dazed state. When a troupe of proletarian women noticed the hopeless figure cowering in the bloody alley, they quickly decided to raise her up as a figurehead and subsequently forced her to accompany them to mass processions and political parades to attest to her conversion to revolutionary ideals.

These women in turn brought Blanche to the Place de la Révolution on that fateful day when her Carmelite sisters were to face the guillotine. There, among the "seething mass of those dreadful women," Blanche was forced to watch her friends' deaths, to hear their voices brutally silenced one by one after approaching the scaffold.⁶⁰ But, to the surprise of the on looking crowd, when only a single, "faded shimmer" of a voice was left, it was joined by another thin, but jubilant voice—that of Blanche, who was now miraculously freed of fear.⁶¹ "All alone across the great terrible square [Blanche] sang the *Veni Creator* of her Sisters to the very end," professing a faith she had never forsaken.⁶² Before reaching the final "amen," however, her voice too was silenced. The furious women of the crowd fell upon Blanche at once, fortuitously allowing her to join with her sisters in martyrdom.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 108.

⁶¹ Ibid., 107.

⁶² Ibid., 108.

Although the account of the Carmelites' martyrdom provides the central frame for Le Fort's novella, the story and its characters are predominantly symbolic, not historic. As the author herself revealed in her memoirs, Blanche de la Force emerged from Le Fort's own personality and fears. Astrid Heyer aptly summarized the effect of Le Fort's symbolic treatment:

At the end of the German novella Blanche de la Force has become a symbol, representing the fate of both the nation and of humankind, combining both historical and spiritual perspectives. She joins von Le Fort's own fears of Nazi Germany and that of the Bolsheviks to the Agony of Christ, becoming the incarnation of the fear of a whole epoch.⁶³

But the novella is more than a condemnation of modern-day political tyranny.

Comingling with the layer of political allegory is a message of deep religious significance, which Le Fort infused into her story of Blanche's fear and ultimate redemption. On this level, *Die Letzte am Schafott* is a poignant study of fear from a spiritual perspective, a fact that Le Fort made clear in an early four-page outline of the novella:

Blanche, whose destiny is to pay, is afraid of the world. She bears the real nature of the world in herself. She feels that the world's finiteness is also her own. When she finds out that this fear will always be there to hinder her, she becomes afraid of her fear. This fear of her fear constitutes her actual guilt. . . .

The object of Blanche's anxiety is fear of death. Death, in this connection, has two aspects: death of the personal entity and death of the whole social class swallowed up by the masses (decline of culture, of social standards, of the "*ancien régime*"). This death, so to speak, is the symbol of all that is transient, a penance imposed on the earth for sin (original sin, for it was not she, Blanche, who caused the revolution, but her forefathers).

God chose the weakest, not the strongest one for His means, since "supernature" is to be expelled. This becomes evident when the strong one [i.e., Marie de l'Incarnation] is denied heroism while the weak one [i.e., Blanche] achieves it. Blanche's fear represents universal fear.⁶⁴

Blanche's fear, thus, encompasses not only her own fears—of death, the fragility of the world, and the imposing revolutionary forces that symbolize the decline of Christian virtue—but rather

⁶³ Astrid Heyer, "The Bernanosian Metamorphosis of Blanche de la Force," *Renascence* 48 (1995): 29.

⁶⁴ Gertrud von Le Fort, unpublished draft outline of *Die Letzte am Schafott*, 2, quoted in La Chevallerie, "Gertrud von Le Fort and the Fear of Blanche de La Force," 16–17.

extends to encompass all fears suffered by everybody, consciously or unconsciously. In the novella, Madame Lidoine recognized the young novice's mystical appropriation of mankind's universal fears, which had been prefigured by her portentous religious name: Sister Blanche of Jesus in the Garden of Agony. As Le Fort inscribed in her draft, "Jesus too was deathly afraid."⁶⁵ Like many of Le Fort's other works, *Die Letzte am Schafott* metaphorically re-presents the life and suffering of Christ, in this case, the night in the garden of Gethsemane.⁶⁶ In another of Le Fort's drafts, the symbolic intention is made even clearer:

In the last night (before the act of consecration) Blanche comes to Marie: "Can't you stay awake with me for one hour?" "Oh my mother. I am afraid." She reveals her fear. Carmel appears to narrow; all of France is too narrow. Marie says "Go my child, go to your father. God does not ask anything of you." "But I love Christ! I am to share with Him the night of his fear, not the night of his death."⁶⁷

At the guillotine, Blanche's redemption from her fear comes through finally accepting it. Before even entering the convent, Blanche had felt ashamed of her fear, even to the point of hiding it, which had led her to fear her fear. Although at first, she fought against it, upon breaking the statue of *le Petit Roi*, Blanche surrendered herself to her fear, which inspired her flight from the convent after taking the vow and facilitated her loss to the revolutionary women. In the final moments, however, Blanche finds previously unknown strength—the strength that she needed to finish her martyred sisters' hymn—through an unanticipated bestowal of divine grace. Le Fort clarified,

In my work, it is by no means a human victory, but a victory of God. . . . There is nothing asked of my Blanche, who had emptied the same awful cup as the famous

⁶⁵ Le Fort, unpublished draft outline of *Die Letzte am Schafott*, 3, quoted in La Chevallerie, "Gertrud von Le Fort and the Fear of Blanche de La Force," 18.

⁶⁶ For example, *The Judgement of the Sea* depicts Advent, *The Pope of the Ghetto* shows the passion of Christ, *The Maiden of Barby* represents the Crucifixion, and *Farinatas' Daughter* portrays the Resurrection. La Chevallerie, "Gertrud von Le Fort and the Fear of Blanche de La Force," 19.

⁶⁷ Le Fort, unpublished draft of *Die Letzte am Schafott*, quoted in La Chevallerie, "Gertrud von Le Fort and the Fear of Blanche de La Force," 19.

Mademoiselle de Sombreul, except for the rightful assumption of obedience to mortal anguish—she is in the end, a destroyed personality.⁶⁸

In the early draft, Le Fort explained that Marie de l'Incarnation would mystically provide Blanche with the strength for martyrdom through a transference of divine grace:

There is no priest left in Paris and she [Marie of the Incarnation] decides to go to the scaffold. On her way she sees Blanche in the middle of the mob singing the *Marseillaise*. She becomes aware of her guilt and gives up her martyrdom in order to save Blanche. In Blanche this releases the strength for martyrdom. Marie of the Incarnation: "Lord, I give up this martyrdom in order to save this one."⁶⁹

With this "miracle in weakness," rooted in Le Fort's Christian faith, the novella ends with a message of inextinguishable hope.⁷⁰ "In my work," Le Fort wrote, "the pure and almost inconceivable grace of God intervenes."⁷¹

Following its initial publication in Munich in 1931, *Die Letzte am Schafott* became an almost immediate literary sensation. Translations soon followed, including an English translation by Olga Marx in 1933, as well as a French translation by Blaise Briod in 1936, which together propelled the book to international success. The French publisher, Jacques Maritain, was so taken by the novella that upon its publication in 1937, he immediately sent a copy to the Dominican priest and filmmaker Father Raymond-Léopold Bruckberger. Bruckberger was equally captivated, but since the war temporarily barred the use of German sources for French projects, he could only dream of one day turning Le Fort's novella into a motion picture. He later recalled,

⁶⁸ "Bei mir handelt es sich nicht darum, den Sieg des Menschen, sondern den Sieg Gottes anzustellen . . . Meine Blanche, die denselben furchtbaren Kelch leeren musste wie das berühmte Fräulein Sombreul, ist eine bis ins Letzte hinein zerstörte Persönlichkeit, von der keine eigene Initiative mehr ausgehen kann." Gertrud von Le Fort, "Schöpfung und Nachschöpfung," *Der Krystall* (1951), quoted in Murray, *La Genèse de "Dialogues des Carmélites,"* 164–165.

⁶⁹ Le Fort, unpublished draft of *Die Letzte am Schafott*, quoted in La Chevallerie, "Gertrud von Le Fort and the Fear of Blanche de La Force," 20.

⁷⁰ Gertrud von Le Fort, *Die Letzte am Schafott* (Munich: Ehrenwirth, 1959), 123.

⁷¹ ". . . bei mir die reine, fast unbegreifliche Gnade Gottes eingreift." Le Fort, *Aufzeichnungen und Erinnerungen*, 95.

All the elements of great classic tragedy were there: the implacable conflict between two universes, between two irreconcilable mysticisms: that of Carmel and that of the Revolution; this conflict was consummated in a voluntary holocaust. I remember that I passed the book to Bernanos . . . He too was dazzled.⁷²

Dialogues des Carmélites (1947–1948) by Georges Bernanos

Shortly after the war, Bruckberger sought opportunity to make his dreamed-of film a reality. In 1946, he found a producer—Gaspard de Cugnac—and began soliciting Georges Bernanos (1888–1948) to write the dialogues.⁷³ In December, Bruckberger obtained the rights for cinematic adaptation from Gertrud von Le Fort. With that first contract signed, Bruckberger, along with his assistant Philippe Agostini, began work on the scenario for the film, which they finished in October 1947. This original scenario divided Le Fort’s novella into fifty-two sequences and included indications for the sets, direction, and dialogue, as well as a résumé (summary) of the action.⁷⁴ Although Bruckberger and Agostini largely followed the sequence of events from Le Fort’s novella, they did depart from the original text in eliminating a small handful of secondary characters (including Blanche’s governess) and by introducing a few new scenes and characters (i.e., Blanche’s brother and the coachman).⁷⁵ Then, with the scenario in hand, Bruckberger secured signatures on the final contracts needed for the film’s production,

⁷² “Tous le éléments de la grande tragédie classique étaient là: le conflit irréductible de deux univers, de deux mystiques inconciliables, le Carmel et la Révolution; ce conflit se consommait dans un holocauste volontaire. Je me souviens que je portai ce livre à Bernanos . . . Lui aussi fut ébloui.” Raymond-Léopold Bruckberger, *Tu finiras sur l’échafaud: Mémoires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), 406.

⁷³ Meredith Murray indicated that Bruckberger first petitioned Bernanos to write the dialogues for the film in a letter of 10 May 1946, although discussions continued until Bruckberger’s first visit to Bernanos in Tunisia in late September or early October 1947. Meredith Murray, *La Genèse de “Dialogues des Carmélites”* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1963), 84–96.

⁷⁴ Gendre, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera,” 284.

⁷⁵ For a detailed comparison between Le Fort’s novella and Bruckberger and Agostini’s scenario, see Murray, *La Genèse de “Dialogues des Carmélites,”* 84–96.

first from the producer Gaspard de Cugnac on 15 October and then from Georges Bernanos on 25 October 1947.⁷⁶

When he signed the contract to write the dialogues for Bruckberger's film, Georges Bernanos was already suffering from the terminal illness to which he would shortly succumb. Nevertheless, he embraced the opportunity to take up one last time the now very personal themes of death and Christian faith that pervaded not only his earlier works, but also Le Fort's novella.⁷⁷ Despite his affliction, he devoted sometimes eight or even ten hours a day to the project, working strictly from Bruckberger and Agostini's scenario.⁷⁸ Although Bernanos had read and reread Le Fort's novella several times since first receiving a copy in February 1938, when he finally began writing the dialogues, he no longer had the book for reference, nor did he consult the historical documents that his personal secretary, Armel Guerne, and Bruckberger eagerly offered him.⁷⁹

Guerne recalled,

Bernanos did not have the text by G. von le Fort, and during his work he had never consulted it. At my offer to look for and find other documents to help with his project, Bernanos only replied that he did not mean to write a historical work and, with some humor, pointed out that he did not work on documents.⁸⁰

Like Gertrud von Le Fort, Bernanos took liberties in retelling the story of the Carmelites' martyrdom. Although he used the original novella's general theme, principal events, and characters, all of which had been reused in Bruckberger's scenario for the film, Bernanos

⁷⁶ Ibid., 17–19.

⁷⁷ Hans Aaraas, "Bernanos in 1988," *Renascence* 41 (1989): 21.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 19; Gendre, "Dialogues des Carmélites: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera," 285.

⁷⁹ Claude Gendre, "Recontres spirituelles autour des Carmélites de Compiègne et de Blanche de la Force," in *Paradoxes et permanence de la pensée Bernanosienne*, ed. Joël Pottier (Paris: Aux Amateurs de Livres, 1989), 141; Gendre, "The Literary Destiny of the Sixteen Carmelite Martyrs of Compiègne and the Role of Emmet Lavery," 40; Murray, *La Genèse de "Dialogues des Carmélites,"* 22–23.

⁸⁰ "Bernanos n'avait pas le texte de G. von le Fort et Durant son travail ne l'a jamais consulté. À ma proposition de le rechercher et de trouver aussi d'autres documents pour faciliter son travail, Bernanos m'a seulement répondu qu'il n'entendait pas faire un travail historique et avec un certain humour qu'il ne travaillait pas sur documents." Armel Guerne to D. Pézeril, 11 July 1960, quoted in Murray, *La Genèse de "Dialogues des Carmélites,"* 23.

departed even from Bruckberger's outline, cutting ten of Bruckberger's scenes, abridging others, and, on the whole, reducing the external action to a minimum.⁸¹ In its place, Bernanos infused his version of the Carmelites' story with an internal, spiritual conflict by introducing themes unique to his own work, such as the Agony of Christ, the Communion of Saints, grace, salvation, honor, and childlike innocence.

Moreover, informing Blanche's struggle with her fear of death were Bernanos's personal reflections as he faced death himself. Bernanos hints at this personal connection in his dialogues when he has Constance intimate, just prior to the Prioress's death, "Well, at fifty-nine it is high time to die, is it not?" At the time when he was writing that scene in the fall of 1947, Bernanos was fifty-nine himself—and dying. Additionally, Bernanos's diaries from the same period reveal his intimate religious meditations as he struggled to reconcile himself to his impending death. In January 1948, for example, he recorded,

We really want what He wants, we really want, without knowing it, our pain, our suffering, our solitude, while we imagine all the time that we only want our pleasure. We believe that we fear our death and that we ought to flee it, when this death is really all we want, as He wanted His.

In the same way that He sacrifices Himself upon every altar where mass is celebrated, so does He die again in every dying man. We want everything He wants, but we do not know that we want it, we do not know ourselves, sin makes us live at the surface of ourselves. We only go back into ourselves to die and it is there that He awaits us.⁸²

Like Le Fort before him, Bernanos's approach to Blanche's fears was quite personal. He projected his own emotional struggle onto his protagonist, infusing her fears with the complexity

⁸¹ Robert Speaight, *Georges Bernanos: A Study of the Man and the Writer* (London: Collins & Harvill, 1973), 267.

⁸² "Nous voulons réellement ce qu'Il veut, nous voulons vraiment, sans le savoir, nos peines, notre souffrance, notre solitude, alors que nous nous imaginons seulement vouloir nos plaisirs. Nous nous imaginons redouter notre mort et la fuir, quand nous voulons réellement cette mort comme Il a voulu la Sienna. De la même manière qu'Il se sacrifie sur chaque autel où se célèbre la messe, Il recommence à mourir dans chaque homme à l'agonie. Nous voulons tout ce qu'Il veut, mais nous ne savons pas que nous le voulons, nous ne nous connaissons pas, le péché nous fait vivre à la surface de nous-mêmes, nous ne rentrerons en nous que pour mourir, et c'est là qu'Il nous attend." Georges Bernanos, unpublished diary entry, 24 January 1948, quoted in Albert Béguin, *Bernanos par lui-même* (Paris: Seuil, 1956), 147. English translation by Astrid Heyer.

of real human emotion. As Guy Gaucher noted, “It would be dangerous to identify Bernanos rigorously with each of his characters. But in Blanche de la Force’s fear, he projected a part of his own fears.”⁸³

On 1 March 1948, after a little over four months of excruciating work, Bernanos sent the first hundred pages of his dialogues to the film’s producer, Gaspard de Cugnac. To say that de Cugnac was not pleased with the text would be an understatement. According to his projected timeline for filming, the dialogues should have already been completed—three months earlier. Moreover, the partial text he received from Bernanos suggested that the complete work would be too long for the film.⁸⁴ It simply would not work. De Cugnac immediately telegraphed Bruckberger: “Dialogues impossible. Cancel.”⁸⁵ Without a word to Bernanos, Bruckberger returned to Paris to discuss the matter in person. “Either Bernanos writes the dialogues,” Bruckberger insisted, “or there will be no film. I’ll withdraw the scenario.”⁸⁶ With that ultimatum, de Cugnac withdrew his protestations, and Bernanos completed the dialogues on 8 April 1948 without interruption. The following day, he took to his bed in rapidly declining health. Suspecting the worst, Bernanos was urgently flown to Paris to the American Hospital at Neuilly and underwent an operation on 20 June.⁸⁷ The operation revealed liver cancer, which left Bernanos’s doctors little hope of his recovery.⁸⁸ He died at dawn on 5 July 1948.

In the confusion preceding Bernanos’s death, his final manuscript was hastily packed away in a trunk to be buried among the writer’s other papers. Several months later, Bernanos’s

⁸³ “Il serait dangereux d’identifier rigoureusement Bernanos à chacun de ses personnages. Mais dans la peur de Blanche de La Force, il a projeté une part de ses propres peurs.” Guy Gaucher, *Le thème de la mort dans les romans de Georges Bernanos* (Paris: Lettres Modernes Minard, 1967), 113.

⁸⁴ Gendre, “Recontres spirituelles autour des Carmélites de Compiègne et de Blanche de la Force,” 144.

⁸⁵ Gendre, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera,” 285–286.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 286; Murray, *La Genèse de “Dialogues des Carmélites,”* 28.

⁸⁸ Speaight, *Georges Bernanos*, 270.

literary executor, Albert Béguin, rediscovered the dialogues for the now rejected film and began negotiations to secure its publication as an independent literary work.⁸⁹ Béguin contacted Gertrud von Le Fort, as well as Gaspard de Cugnac to request authorization for the publication. After reading Bernanos's manuscript, Le Fort gave her immediate consent:

In these dialogues, I have found many beautiful and striking things—but how could it be otherwise in a work by Georges Bernanos? Without doubt it is difficult to perceive the connection with my novella, aside from the shared characters that are my own poetic invention. For the film—if it is ever produced—I would wish for a greater fidelity to my work, but here it is not a question of the film, but of the publication of the last pages written by Bernanos. As I have already told you, it is my own desire that this absolutely must be published.⁹⁰

Bernanos's text, under the title *Dialogues des Carmélites*, was published in 1949 by the Editions de La Baconnière in Neuchâtel. Like Le Fort's novella before it, Bernanos's dialogues were hailed as a masterpiece, both in literature and on the stage, and soon met with international acclaim.⁹¹

On the whole, Bernanos's *Dialogues des Carmélites* follows after its German model in characters and principal events. The scenario by Bruckberger and Agostini did make a few major changes in the plot, however, which we see subsequently in Bernanos's dialogues. For example, the Prioress's death scene, only briefly mentioned in Le Fort's novella, is greatly expanded and intensified in Bernanos's text. Bernanos used the Prioress's agonizing death to iterate one of the central themes of the work, namely, his mystical interpretation of the Communion of Saints, or,

⁸⁹ Murray, *La Genèse de "Dialogues des Carmélites,"* 28–29.

⁹⁰ "Dans les *Dialogues*, j'ai trouvé beaucoup de choses belles et saisissantes—comment pourrait-il en être autrement dans une œuvre de Georges Bernanos? Sans doute le lien avec ma nouvelle est-il à peine perceptible, sinon par les personnages eux-mêmes qui sont mon invention poétique. Pour le film—si jamais on le réalise—je souhaiterais une fidélité plus grande à mon œuvre, mais ici il ne s'agit pas du film, mais de l'édition des dernières pages écrites par Bernanos. Que cette édition doive absolument se faire, est, je vous l'ai déjà dit, mon propre désir." Murray, *La Genèse de "Dialogues des Carmélites,"* 29–30.

⁹¹ Bernanos's dialogues were translated into German in 1951 and were adapted for the stage shortly thereafter. Eckart Peterich presented the first theatrical version of Bernanos's *Dialogues des Carmélites*—or, in its German version, *Die begnadete Angst* (The Blessed Fear)—at Zurich's Schauspielhaus on 14 June 1951. Translations into English, Italian, and Spanish soon followed, and theatrical adaptations were presented in Holland, England, and Germany. Gendre, "Dialogues des Carmélites: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera," 287.

as M. Owen Lee explained, the Catholic belief “that all members of the Church, living and dead, are bound together in a community, in a close-knit personal relationship with one another effected by grace.”⁹² Bernanos took this doctrine one step further, extending the concept of shared grace to its ultimate extreme by promulgating the redemptive power of vicarious suffering. Thus, the Prioress offers her death agony as a mystical sacrifice for Blanche, whom she saw as the most vulnerable and threatened of her daughters. On her deathbed, she confides to Blanche, “To ward off that threat I would willingly have given my life. . . . I can now give only my death, a very poor death.”⁹³ Similarly, Michel Estève explained, “As Christ, on the wood of the Cross, suffered atrociously in order to liberate humankind, the Prioress dies in suffering and anguish, so as to help Blanche assume her vocation.”⁹⁴ The two characters are linked in what Francis Poulenc later called a “transfer of grace.”⁹⁵ The following conversation between Blanche and Constance makes Bernanos’s intent particularly clear:

Constance: Consider the death of our dear Mother, Sister Blanche! Who would have believed that she would have found death so hard, that she would know so little how to die! . . . That must have been someone else’s death, a death which did not fit our Prioress, too small for her . . .

Blanche: Someone else’s death—but what, in fact, does that mean, Sister Constance?

Constance: It means that this other person, when the hour of death comes, will be surprised to find it so easy, to find death comfortable . . . We do not die for ourselves, but for each other, or even each in place of another, who knows?⁹⁶

⁹² M. Owen Lee, *A Season of Opera: From Orpheus to Ariadne* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 171.

⁹³ Georges Bernanos, “Dialogues des Carmélites,” trans. by Michael Legat, in *The Heroic Face of Innocence: Three Stories* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 73–74.

⁹⁴ “De même que le Christ, sur le bois de la croix, souffrit atrocement pour racheter l’humanité, la Prieure meurt dans la souffrance, l’angoisse et la peur, pour aider Blanche à assumer sa vocation.” Estève, *Georges Bernanos*. 284.

⁹⁵ Poulenc, *Cahiers de l’Herne* (Paris: Editions de l’Herne, 1961), 160, quoted in Gendre, “*Dialogues des Carmélites: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera*,” 310.

⁹⁶ Bernanos, “Dialogues des Carmélites,” 81–82.

Thus, in Bernanos's text, it is primarily through Madame de Croissy's despairing death, and not Marie de l'Incarnation's sacrifice of her own martyrdom, that Blanche mystically finds the strength to mount the scaffold.

A second addition by Bernanos is the scene between Blanche and her brother as he attempts to convince her to leave the convent (see the Appendix for a brief outline of Bernanos's dialogues). Interestingly, this scene somewhat parallels the real-life experience of Sister Constance, whose family dispatched her brother to Compiègne in the midst of the Terror in order to convince the young novice to return home.⁹⁷ Bernanos also adds a scene depicting the Carmelites in prison, as well as a series of scenes wherein Blanche learns of her sisters' imprisonment and then visits Marie de l'Incarnation to petition her help in assisting them (see Appendix). Finally, Bernanos changes the end of the drama slightly. Although, as in Le Fort's novella, Blanche does become a servant in what was previously her family home, in Bernanos's version, she is not seized by revolutionary women. Thus, she appears alone at the execution, and her death comes as she, already having taken the first steps toward the scaffold, is pushed forward by the angry crowd to meet the guillotine.

The major difference between Le Fort's and Bernanos's works, however, is in their characterization of Blanche. Whereas Le Fort's Blanche is symbolic was intended to represent an entire epoch and its fears, Bernanos's Blanche is personal. As Michel Estève stressed,

Contrary to Gertrud von Le Fort, Bernanos does not make Blanche's fate the symbol of the fate of France, subject to the Terror, or to that of Germany, threatened by Nazism. He views history only as a point of departure for an incarnate spiritual adventure that engulfs the whole being on its way to salvation.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Bush, *To Quell the Terror*, 70–71.

⁹⁸ "Contrairement à Gertrude von Le Fort, Bernanos ne fait pas du destin de Blanche le symbole de celui de la France livrée à la Terreur, de l'Allemagne menacée par le nazisme. Il prend l'histoire uniquement comme point de départ d'une aventure spirituelle incarnée qui engage l'être entier sur le chemin du salut." Michel Estève, *Georges Bernanos. Un triple itinéraire* (Paris: Hachette, 1981), 276.

Moreover, Blanche's "spiritual adventure"—her struggle to overcome and ultimately submit to her fears—is made more intimate and complex in Bernanos's text. In Le Fort's novella, Blanche's fears, though intense, are confined; she fears the transience of the world, she fears death, and ultimately, she comes to fear her own fear. Compared to Le Fort's original character, Bernanos's Blanche harbors fears of a more unclear nature. Whereas Le Fort clearly explained how her Blanche feared the instability of the world in the beginning of her novella, Bernanos does not elucidate upon his Blanche's specific fears. Rather, he gives a general impression of the depth of her fear without revealing its possible causes. For example, during her conversation with her brother and father in Bernanos's dialogues, Blanche insists that she has always borne a weight upon her heart, that every night to her is like the night of the Holy Agony, and that while she does not fear the world, it is an element in which she simply cannot live.⁹⁹ Moreover, Blanche's fears seem to transform and expand as she faces not only the threats from the Revolution that looms just outside the convent walls, but also the shameful glances from her Carmelite sisters because of her weakness and inadequacy as well as her gradual realization that she cannot live up to her sense of honor as a noblewoman.

This connection between Blanche's fear and her honor, and in turn her disgrace, is a uniquely Bernanosian addition. Joseph Pfeifer identified this connection as one of the central themes of the entire work:

In order to make fear the driving element of the action, in order to make it the element from which everything else is derived, Bernanos associates it with the sentiment of honor, an active principle, and does this so closely that this sentiment, joined with fear, becomes one of the dominant themes of the drama.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Bernanos, "Dialogues des Carmélites," 55–59.

¹⁰⁰ "Pour faire de l'angoisse l'élément moteur de l'action, pour faire découler d'elle le noeud, Bernanos lui associe dans le sentiment de l'honneur un principe actif, et cela si étroitement que ce sentiment devient avec l'angoisse un des thèmes dominants du drame." Pfeifer, "La Passion du Christ et la structure de *Dialogues des Carmélites*," 149.

Blanche's sense of honor largely defines her character, and it becomes, like her fear, a central motivating element of her actions. In her study of Bernanos's *Dialogues*, Sister Meredith Murray also commented on the centrality of this theme of honor:

Bernanos gives his Blanche another instinct, which is as deeply rooted as her fear and which is in opposition to it: that is pride or the sentiment of honor. Fearful and not feeble, Blanche has a sense of the duties that her birth imposes upon her, duties that presuppose generosity and courage.¹⁰¹

Blanche's sense of honor takes its repercussion in her religious vocation. In Carmel, she had sought for "a heroic life," hoping to find therein a refuge from the world that had sorely tried her courage.¹⁰² But once there, Blanche struggled to reconcile her responsibilities as a Carmelite—to dedicate herself to the will and service of God, even unto death—with her fear of death, which was closer now than ever before. She recoils from Constance's child-like, even playful acceptance of death, and becomes appalled at her companion's suggestion that together they offer their "poor little lives" for their ailing Prioress.¹⁰³ Later in the story, Blanche finds courage vicariously through the strength of Marie de l'Incarnation, but, when Blanche faces a direct conflict between her Carmelite duties and her overpowering fear, she falters once again. For Blanche, taking the vow of martyrdom becomes as much a trial of her physical strength as of her spiritual strength as she tries to reconcile the two powerful and opposing forces. Bernanos's stage directions for this scene make Blanche's struggle poignantly clear. After Mother Marie proposes the vow of martyrdom for a second and final time, Blanche looks very tired. Her physical and spiritual exhaustion deepens as the remaining events of the evening unfold. Upon casting her vote, Blanche's face appears haggard, and she soon begins weeping uncontrollably.

¹⁰¹ "Bernanos dote sa Blanche d'un autre instinct aussi profondément enraciné que sa peur et en opposition avec elle: c'est la fierté ou le sentiment de l'honneur. Craintive et non lâche, Blanche a le sens des devoirs que sa naissance impose, devoirs qui présupposent la générosité et le courage." Murray, *La Genèse de "Dialogues des Carmélites,"* 156.

¹⁰² Bernanos, "Dialogues des Carmélites," 62.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 69.

By the time she actually takes the vow, “Blanche’s voice is very distinct, but forced—it should be more or less obvious that she is exhausting her last resources.”¹⁰⁴ Completely overwhelmed, Blanche flees the convent. The trial of her honor and courage had become too much.

A second important difference between Bernanos’s and Le Fort’s versions of Blanche is the degree to which she participates in determining her fate. In Le Fort’s novella, Blanche is depicted as being almost powerless at times, forced to accept the will of providence. On the other hand, Bernanos’s Blanche takes an active role, despite the fateful circumstances that still lead to fulfill her role as a predestined martyr. We see this first in her conversation with the Prioress, when, in Bernanos’s dialogues, Blanche *chooses* her Carmelite name: Sister Blanche of the Agony of Christ. Unlike Le Fort’s Blanche, who had the name thrust upon her by the Carmelites’ superior, Bernanos’s character assumes it of her own free will. Later, when taking the vow of martyrdom, Bernanos gives Blanche another opportunity to exercise her agency. After Mother Marie declares that they will take the vow only if the community gives it their unanimous support, she asks her sisters to cast a secret ballot. Although lacking in resolve, Blanche casts her vote: a vote for martyrdom. As Bernanos notes in the stage directions, Blanche’s decision “could be that of a person who has just made up her mind by the toss of a coin,” but nonetheless, the decision was made.¹⁰⁵

Blanche takes an even more active role in the final scenes of the dialogues. After the Carmelites’ imprisonment, in a scene of Bernanos’s invention, Blanche runs to Marie de l’Incarnation, crying, “They must be saved! They must not be killed! They must be saved, whatever the cost!”¹⁰⁶ She begs Mother Marie to help her attempt to save their sisters, stubbornly

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 129.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 128.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 141.

insisting, “I do not want them to die!”¹⁰⁷ Then, in the final scene, Blanche appears at the execution willingly; she is not forced to be there like the character in the German novella. There, having accepted her role in the Carmelites’ predestined martyrdom, she adds her voice to those of her sisters, one that sounds “crisper, more resolute than the others.”¹⁰⁸ Singing, she slowly approaches the scaffold, almost willing her own martyrdom, which is subsequently thrust upon her when forcibly pushed forward by a crowd of women. Guy Gaucher summarized the significance of this final scene:

Having offered her life and her death, her fears and her anguish, Sister Blanche can climb the steps to her passion, through which yet another Agony occurs, one that gives meaning to her own. From the moment she freely chooses to move towards her passion, the mystery of a definite reconciliation of Fear and Death is consummated in her, a communion between Fear and Death through which man discovers the unity of his own being, which, until now, had been rent asunder.¹⁰⁹

Blanche’s free consent to offer her life as a martyr thus yields the critical reconciliation between her previously conflicting motivations. When Blanche finally submits herself to her divine destiny, her fear is no longer in opposition to her sense of honor.

Through such a sensitive construal of Blanche’s fears, her sense of honor, and her ultimate self-acceptance, Bernanos transformed Blanche from Le Fort’s symbolic creation into a complex individual of human dimensions. And it was this intimacy, this overtly personal spiritual dimension that, in large part, attracted Francis Poulenc to Bernanos’s text.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 142.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 150.

¹⁰⁹ “Ayant fait l’offrande de sa vie et de sa mort, de ses peurs et de ses angoisses, Soeur Blanche peut gravir les degrés de sa passion, en laquelle se reproduit une autre Agonie qui donne son sens à la sienne. Dès l’instant où elle choisit librement d’aller au supplice, se consommé en elle le mystère de la définitive réconciliation de la Peur et de la Mort. Communion de la Peur et de la Mort par laquelle l’homme jusqu’ici déchiré, retrouve l’unité de sa personne.” Guy Gaucher, *Le thème de la mort dans les romans de Georges Bernanos* (Paris: Lettres Modernes Minard, 1967), 105.

Dialogues des Carmélites (1953–1956) by Francis Poulenc

In March 1953, Francis Poulenc was approached by Guido Valcarengi, Director of Editions Ricordi, with a commission for a ballet for La Scala. The proposed subject was the life of the martyred Saint Margaret of Cortona, but after some consideration of the topic, Poulenc remained uninspired and approached Valcarengi with his concerns. As the composer himself recounted,

I had vaguely thought about a half-profane, half-sacred topic concerning Saint Marguerite of Cortona, but I could not come to grips with my project . . . I revealed to Mr. Valcaranghi [sic], director of Ricordi Editions, which had commissioned the ballet, my lack of enthusiasm for the project. Ah! I added, in the midst of a charming lunch, why don't you ask me to write an opera.—There's no problem with that, I will commission one from you right away, replied my host. But the libretto?—Since you are looking for a mystical topic, why not write an opera on *Dialogues of the Carmelites* by Bernanos. I was stupefied by this proposition. What would the public say about an opera lacking a love intrigue? Having always given credit to the innate theatrical sense of the Italians, I dismissed this objection, but needed time to consider. . . Oh! how much! To be sure, I knew Bernanos' play which I had read, reread, and seen twice, but I had no idea of its verbal rhythm, a most important point for me. I had decided to examine it later, upon my return to Paris, when, two days later, right in the middle of the window of a Roman bookstore, I saw *The Dialogues* which seemed to await me. . . I bought the book and decided to reread it. In order to do so I installed myself in the Piazza Navone, on the terrace of the café *Tre Scalini*. It was ten in the morning. . . . At twelve thirty, I was drunk with enthusiasm but decisive proof was needed: would I find the music for such a libretto. I opened the book at random obliging myself, to translate *instantly* into music the first sentences I was reading. Luck did not spare me. You judge: Mother Superior [First Prioress]. “Do not believe this chair that I use is mine through rank and position, like the footstool of a Duchess. Alas! This is the wish of my loving daughters who take such good care of me, and insist that I revel in comfort. But it is not always easy to revive all those former habits that one has long ago discarded. And I can see that what should have been a remarkable pleasure will forever remain for me only a dire necessity.” As unbelievable as this may appear, I immediately found the melodic curve of this lengthy response! The die was cast. At two o'clock, I telegraphed Mr. Valcarengi, the true dowser, that I would write *Dialogues*.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Francis Poulenc, “Comment j’ai composé les ‘Dialogues des Carmélites,’” *L’Opéra de Paris* 14 (1957): 15–17. English translation from Carl B. Schmidt, *Entrancing Music: A Documented Biography of Francis Poulenc* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon, 2001), 380–381.

Having several previous commitments to attend to, Poulenc could not begin concentrated work on *Dialogues des Carmélites* for several months. By the summer, though, Poulenc had begun preliminary work on the libretto. The question of how to divide Bernanos's text into a workable libretto plagued him for some time, but he finally reached a solution in June 1953 while traveling by train from Paris to Brive.¹¹¹ At this time, his plan for the libretto consisted of two main acts, the first containing the scenes before the Revolution, and the second those of the Revolution.¹¹² Poulenc would later modify this division at the advice of Margarita Wallmann, creating instead three shorter acts.¹¹³ Although Poulenc had to shorten Bernanos's text substantially for his opera (he cut more than two-thirds of Bernanos's lines), the composer worked diligently to preserve the spirit of the original text.¹¹⁴ Even Albert Béguin, who, as Bernanos's literary executor, was perhaps the most apt to be critical of Poulenc's treatment of Bernanos's text, could only offer his compliments:

It seems to me you have accomplished a veritable tour de force in adapting [Bernanos's] text of *Dialogues des Carmélites* to the exigencies of a musical composition, while remaining absolutely faithful all the time to his spirit and to the major lines of a very delicate architecture. It was not an easy thing to transpose into an opera this framework nourished by profound ideas and sustained by a continuous meditation. I find *all* of Bernanos in your presentation, and if I had not known that you had to sacrifice many lines I have the impression that I would not notice it.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Francis Poulenc, *Entretiens avec Claude Rostand* (Paris: René Julliard, 1954), 213, quoted in Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse*, 382. Schmidt also includes a detailed table charting the correspondence between Bernanos's script and Poulenc's original and final librettos.

¹¹³ Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse*, 400–401.

¹¹⁴ Gendre, "Dialogues des Carmélites: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera," 295.

¹¹⁵ "Vous me semblez avoir accompli un véritable tour de force, en adaptant son texte des *Dialogues des Carmélites* aux exigences d'une œuvre musicale, en restant toutefois absolument fidèle à son esprit et aux lignes majeures d'une architecture très délicate. Ce n'était pas chose facile de transposer en opéra cette trame nourrie de thèmes profonds et soutenue par une méditation continue. Je retrouve *tout* Bernanos dans votre présentation, et si je ne savais pas que vous avez dû sacrifier bien des répliques, j'ai l'impression que je ne m'en apercevrais pas." Albert Béguin to Francis Poulenc, 5 July 1955. Francis Poulenc, *Correspondance 1910–1963*, ed. Myriam Chimènes (Paris: Fayard, 1994), 823. English translation by Carl Schmidt.

Poulenc began composition of the opera in August 1953. The opera plagued him from the beginning. After only a week of work, he wrote to Pierre Bernac of the difficulties:

I have begun *Les Carmélites* and literally *cannot sleep* because of it. I think it will be all right but there are so many problems. Expect to receive a flood of questions as I want it to be more than vocal. . . . If I am to succeed with this work it will only be through the music identifying absolutely with the Bernanos *spirit*. Very light orchestration to allow the text to come through.¹¹⁶

Despite his difficulties, Poulenc worked at a lightning pace, completing approximately one scene per week. On 31 August, he admitted to Stéphane Audel,

I am working like *a madman*, I do not go out, do not see anyone . . . I do not think of anything else. . . . I hardly recognize myself. I am crazy about my subject, to the point of believing that I have actually known these women.¹¹⁷

As promised, Poulenc consulted Bernac throughout the composition process, who responded with consistent support and advice regarding the vocal register for the principal characters.¹¹⁸

Through March 1954, Poulenc worked ardently on the first act of the opera, but, as Claude Gendre wrote, “his morale was sinking.”¹¹⁹ By early 1954, Poulenc’s emotional state had begun showing signs of turmoil, largely thanks to problems in his relationship with his young lover, Lucien Roubert, a traveling salesman from Toulon whom Poulenc had met in the spring of 1950. Soon after that initial meeting, the couple had embarked on a passionate, though stormy affair, but by January 1954, their relationship had begun to show signs of deterioration. In February, Poulenc confided to Henri Hell:

I am *horribly sad*, a thing that I can only speak of to you. I feel that the separation from you-know-who is secretly having the desired effect, and in spite of the

¹¹⁶ Francis Poulenc to Pierre Bernac, 22 August 1953. Poulenc, *Selected Correspondence 1915–1968*, 206.

¹¹⁷ Francis Poulenc to Stéphane Audel, 31 August 1953, in Poulenc, *Selected Correspondence 1915–1968*, 206.

¹¹⁸ Poulenc, *Selected Correspondence 1915–1968*, 206–211; Gendre, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera,” 295–299.

¹¹⁹ Gendre, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera,” 299.

distance separating us, I am weak enough to hang on to it desperately. No doubt this climate of anguish is necessary for my ladies.¹²⁰

By April, Poulenc's relationship with Lucien seemed to be nearing its end. To compound matters further, Poulenc's dear friend and former lover Raymond Destouches decided at that inopportune time to move out of Poulenc's home into his own in Noizay.¹²¹ Without the reassuring presence of his old friend, not to mention the loss of Lucien, Poulenc felt abandoned, and his despair revealed itself as nothing short of a nervous breakdown. Poulenc began complaining of an excess of health problems—intestinal trouble, inflamed tonsils, problems with his gall bladder and uric acid, even a paranoid certainty that he had stomach cancer.¹²² He wrote to Father Griffin of the Discalced Carmelite Fathers at Mount Carmel Seminary in Dallas, Texas, to plead for spiritual help:

My God, you cannot know the anguish. God knows if I shall ever complete *dialogues des carmélites* [sic] because I am very ill. It is my stomach. Cancer. In spite of the doctors' reassurances that there is nothing wrong with me, I fear that I will never be able to work again. Will you ask the Carmelite Fathers of Dallas to make a novena that I recover my health and that I may be able to glorify God and the blessed martyrs of Compiègne with my music? I am in terrible fear. Will God take into account my poor efforts—the Mass, the religious motets? Will He at least see them and me kindly, as another bungler, a *jongleur de Notre Dame*? Please locate a good peasant priest to help me. The priests who are considered "intelligent" exhaust me.¹²³

In July, Poulenc recalled this desperate time in a letter to Bernac:

I have indeed poisoned myself little by little. Too much introspection—emotional as well as intellectual—has been gnawing away at me for months. . . but do not forget a certain drama that has been *obsessing* me for the past eight years; my

¹²⁰ "Je suis *horriblement triste*, ce que je ne peux dire qu'à vous. Je sens que la séparation fait son œuvre sournoisement auprès de qui vous savez et j'ai la faiblesse en dépit des kilomètres d'y tenir terriblement. Sans doute ce climat d'angoisse était-il nécessaire à mes dames." Francis Poulenc to Henri Hell, [14 February 1954]. Poulenc, *Correspondance 1910–1963*, 785.

¹²¹ Gendre, "Dialogues des Carmélites: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera," 300; Benjamin Ivry, *Francis Poulenc* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 170–172.

¹²² See July 1954 letter to Pierre Bernac. Poulenc, *Selected Correspondance 1915–1968*, 219–221. Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse*, 394.

¹²³ John Howard Griffin, *The John Howard Griffin Reader*, ed. Bradford Daniel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 538.

consuming love for Lucien, which far from abating only seems to have grown more intense; my limitless affection for Raymond. When in April it became certain—something I knew and even wanted—that Raymond would soon move to the town of Noizay and when, in addition, I believed Lucien to be more distant, I fell into a blind panic that was not helped at all by worries about my liver, about my faith, about the von Le Fort Bernanos obstruction which means that I may be writing a work that can never be performed, and that I may not be able to sign up with Ricordi, etc.¹²⁴

Poulenc was encountering problems with his opera as well—not in its composition, but rather legal difficulties arising from a fourth adaptation of Le Fort’s novella: Emmet Lavery’s 1949 play *Song at the Scaffold*. Bernanos’s executor, Albert Béguin, had apprised Poulenc of the potential copyright issue in October 1953. At that time, Béguin and Bernanos’s heirs were in the midst of an extended legal battle with Lavery over the rights to the publication of Bernanos’s *Dialogues*, since, thanks to a 29 April 1949 contract with Gertrud von Le Fort, Lavery had secured exclusive rights for all adaptations of the novella.¹²⁵ A few days after their first meeting, Béguin wrote to Poulenc,

I believe I should point out to you that the heirs of Geroges Bernanos are not in a position at present to authorize a new adaptation of the work which is the subject of a rather complicated legal battle. During the visit which you kindly paid me, I told you that it would be necessary to wait before deciding anything since the decision of the Society of Authors, which is serving as arbitrator, has not yet been given. I am happy to repeat what I have previously said: once the sentence has been pronounced (if it is what we hope for), I shall do everything possible for you to obtain the necessary rights . . . But in the meantime, I would be very grateful if you would refrain from discussing the subject too much, as our American adversaries might take offence and, using that as an argument, accuse us of exploiting a work that is currently in litigation and still awaiting a decision.¹²⁶

Unfortunately for Poulenc and the Bernanos heirs, the sentence was not the one they hoped for. On 20 July 1954, the Société des Auteurs unanimously upheld Lavery’s contract,

¹²⁴ Francis Poulenc to Pierre Bernac, July 1954, in Poulenc, *Selected Correspondance 1915–1968*, 219–221.

¹²⁵ For a thorough discussion of the legal difficulties involved with adaptations of Le Fort’s novella, see Gendre, “The Literary Destiny of the Sixteen Carmelite Martyrs of Compiègne and the Role of Emmet Lavery,” as well as Gendre, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera.”

¹²⁶ Unpublished letter from Albert Béguin to Francis Poulenc, 23 November 1953, quoted in Gendre, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera,” 297.

confirming his claim to exclusive rights for all adaptations of Le Fort's novella.¹²⁷ Poulenc would now have to apply to Lavery for his authorization of the opera, and, as seen from Poulenc's July 1954 letter to Bernac, the composer feared the worst.

In the fall of 1954, Poulenc and Lavery met in Paris.¹²⁸ Fortunately, Lavery gave his consent for the opera, with certain conditions, of course. Lavery explained the agreement in a letter to Gertrud von Le Fort:

When I was in Paris a few days ago, I reached an agreement—on your behalf as well as my own—with the distinguished composer, M. Poulenc—who had (innocently) started work on an opera from *Dialogues des Carmélites*, then discovered, as a result of the Society's arbitration, that *there was no legal title* which M. Béguin could license to him! M. Poulenc now agrees that *your novel* will be credited as the *primary* source material, that *secondary* acknowledgement will be made to *both* Lavery and the Bernanos version; that on every program of the opera—which may not be ready for two years—von le Fort and Lavery will be credited as the holders and owners of the world wide stage and film rights, as set forth in our contract of 1949; that appropriate royalties from the opera will be paid to von le Fort and Lavery—including any revenues of the Poulenc score. M. Poulenc is a fine and honorable man—and I believe he is very happy with this formula, which permits him to continue his opera—and yet protects our rights as well.¹²⁹

Although Lavery's letter implies a contractual agreement, final discussions between Béguin, the lawyers, and Lavery's agent would last for more than six months, thus delaying the possibility of any formal agreement with Poulenc regarding the opera. In the interim, Poulenc expressed his

¹²⁷ Gendre, "The Literary Destiny of the Sixteen Carmelite Martyrs of Compiègne and the Role of Emmet Lavery," 49.

¹²⁸ In a 1984 letter to Claude Gendre, Lavery indicated that this meeting took place on 16 October 1954, the same day as Poulenc's appointment with his neurologist in Paris. Considering Lavery's 1 October letter to Gertrud von Le Fort wherein Lavery professes having already come to an agreement with Poulenc, the chronology is inconsistent, but, as Carl Schmidt has pointed out, "additional documents gathered by Gendre have indicated that Lavery was not always honorable in representing the facts." Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse*, 397.

¹²⁹ Emmet Lavery to Gertrud von le Fort, 1 October 1954, quoted in Gendre, "*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera," 302.

continued concerns about the legal difficulties. “If only I had some assurance about *Les Carmélites*,” he pleaded to Simone Girard later that fall.¹³⁰ And to Denise Bourdet,

This business of the *Carmélites* has really thrown me. Just imagine that I am still waiting for the Bernanos agreement. My lawyer promises it within a fortnight. Perhaps I’ll then regain my composure. But what a horrible adventure!¹³¹

Meanwhile, Poulenc’s other concerns—his weakness for Lucien and his persistent hypochondria—continued to plague him. In November 1954, Poulenc’s tour with Bernac was abruptly cancelled when Poulenc, overwrought and emotionally unstable, had to be hospitalized. He spent seven days at Dr. Maillard-Verger’s L’Hay-les-Roses clinic heavily sedated with barbiturates, sleeping eighteen or nineteen hours a day.¹³² Shortly after his release, he wrote to Marthe Bosredon, expressing his still tenuous emotional state:

My poor darling, if you knew from what black hole I am only just emerging—it has been atrocious. For months now I have been tormented by troubles, betrayed in my work (I still do not have the Bernanos authorization for *Les Carmélites*). I was in such a state of nerves that I had to abandon my tour of Germany after two concerts and go into a clinic. I am better, but sleep still evades me and sleeping pills make me dopey. It is a vicious circle from which I only wish I could escape.¹³³

In January, now partly recovered, Poulenc resumed work on *Dialogues*, which had been interrupted since March 1954. The next month, Lucien Roubert was diagnosed as having “terrible pleurisy,” and Poulenc had him hospitalized in Cannes. Despite months of agony, reconciliation between the two friends was now definite, and Poulenc directed himself to Lucien’s care. Then, in March, an official contract between Poulenc and Lavery put an end to the

¹³⁰ Francis Poulenc to Simone Girard, [September/October 1954], in Poulenc, *Selected Correspondence 1915–1968*, 224.

¹³¹ Francis Poulenc to Denise Bourdet, [4 October 1954], quoted in Gendre, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera,” 302–303.

¹³² Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse*, 397.

¹³³ Francis Poulenc to Marthe Bosredon, 30 December [1954], in Poulenc, *Selected Correspondence 1915–1963*, 227–228.

second of Poulenc's distressing concerns, leaving the composer free to continue work on the opera.

Poulenc finished *Dialogues des Carmélites* in August 1955, amid Lucien's deteriorating health. As Poulenc confided to Pierre Bernac, his work on the opera was intimately connected to his relationship with Lucien:

I have entrusted him to my sixteen blessed Carmelites: may they protect his final hours since he has been so closely involved in their story. In fact I began the work at his side, in happiness, in Lyon in August 1953. After all the torment, which I need not describe to you, I have just finished the work, at his side, during the last days of his earthly life. As I wrote to you once before, I am haunted by Bernanos's phrase: "We do not die for ourselves alone . . . but for, or instead of, each other." If Raymond remains the secret of *Les Mamelles* and *Figure Humaine*, Lucien is certainly that of the *Stabat Mater* and *Les Carmélites*. Yes, I have completed my opera, apart from a few final touches . . . L[ucien] has shown so much tenderness towards me over the last six months, and I have been able to make his life so much more comfortable and have him so well cared for, that this great drama of my life is ending in the most melancholy (dare I say it) happiness.¹³⁴

While Poulenc polished the final scenes of the opera, he asked the Carmel of Compiègne to pray for Lucien, knowing that his end was waxing fatally near.¹³⁵ On 21 October 1955, Lucien finally succumbed to his incurable lung cancer. Poulenc confided to Simone Girard the troubling coincidence of his friend's final moments:

Lucien [was] delivered from his martyrdom ten days ago, the final copy of *Les Carmélites* completed (take note) at the very moment the poor boy breathed his last. I got up from the table and said to my faithful Anna: "I have finished: Monsieur Lucien will die now." Who will ever know all that lies at the secret heart of certain works?¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Francis Poulenc to Pierre Bernac, [19 August 1955], quoted in Gendre, "*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera," 306.

¹³⁵ Gendre, "*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera," 306–307.

¹³⁶ Francis Poulenc to Simone Girard, 31 October [1955], in Poulenc, *Selected Correspondence 1915–1968*, 236.

After Lucien's death, Poulenc often gave spiritual significance to the many trials he endured while working on *Dialogues des Carmélites*, believing that his anguish was necessary for the composition of such a work.¹³⁷ Pierre Bernac shared such a belief:

Those ladies of Compiègne were no strangers to [Poulenc's] great crisis. If Blanche de la Force and the first Prioress transmitted to him their fear of death, one can at least explain it in part by the intensity with which he succeeded in bringing them to life. On certain evenings when he played his opera for friends he would be almost in a state of trance.¹³⁸

Moreover, in a letter to Hervé Dugardin, Poulenc admitted to feeling an intimate connection with the opera and Blanche in particular.¹³⁹ The two years of agony that Poulenc endured during the composition of the opera, marked in the end by his own fears of death as he contemplated the imminent passing of a loved one, generated a profound connection to "those ladies of Compiègne." Mark Bosco explained,

In transmitting Bernanos's understanding of Blanche de la Force and the first prioress, Poulenc found expression for his own fear of abandonment, his own fear of death. By bringing these two characters to life with such intensity, he was able to give musical form to his experience of hidden grace lurking underneath the surface of such fear.¹⁴⁰

Specifically, in Lucien's death, Poulenc felt that he understood Bernanos's mystical conception of grace, thus further binding him to his operatic protagonist. As the composer intimated to Bernac:

Naturally, my thoughts often revolve round Lucien and, although I have made total peace with his memory, the notion that he may have died in my place, and from what I believed I was suffering from, troubles me deeply.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Francis Poulenc to Rose Dercourt-Plaut, 2 July [1955], in Poulenc, *Selected Correspondence 1915–1968*, 231.

¹³⁸ Pierre Bernac to X, 17 July 1954, quoted in Myriam Chimènes, "Du Gendarme incompris aux *Dialogues des Carmélites*," *L'Avant-Scène Opéra* 52 (1983): 31.

¹³⁹ Francis Poulenc to Hervé Dugardin, 30 March 1958, in Poulenc, *Correspondance 1910–1963*, 890.

¹⁴⁰ Mark Bosco, "Georges Bernanos and Francis Poulenc: Catholic Convergences in *Dialogues of the Carmelites*," *Logos* 12 (2009): 36.

¹⁴¹ Francis Poulenc to Pierre Bernac, 17 August [1956]. Poulenc, *Selected Correspondence 1915–1968*, 242.

Perhaps Poulenc's anguish, a sort of vicarious death agony, allowed him to infuse his opera with the same emotional poignancy found in Bernanos's original text. The composer's foremost fear during the composition process was that his opera would not adequately reflect the spiritual dimension of Bernanos's original dialogues.¹⁴² But, as Daniel Pézeril assured Poulenc, the works share not only their text, but also a profound spiritual affinity:

From the beginning you found your way to the heart of *Dialogues* and met Bernanos in his silent role—an encounter of souls if ever there were one. Each of you has been touched by a certain grace.¹⁴³

¹⁴² See Francis Poulenc to Pierre Bernac, 22 August 1953. Poulenc, *Selected Correspondence 1915–1968*, 206

¹⁴³ Daniel Pézeril to Francis Poulenc, quoted in Gendre, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera,” 310.

CHAPTER II: A DRAMATIC AND MUSICAL ANALYSIS OF THE OPERA

Although Poulenc had to condense Bernanos's dialogues substantially for his operatic realization of *Dialogues des Carmélites*, he worked diligently to retain the spiritual dimension and major themes of the original dialogues. In an article published in the 1961 issue of the *Cahiers de l'Herne* devoted to Bernanos, Poulenc recalled,

In writing my opera I steeped myself so entirely in that admirable text that it became almost my own by the process of osmosis which is inherent in all collaboration coming from the heart. It was not so much the true history of the Carmelites, overwhelming as it is, that made me decide to undertake this work, as the magnificent prose of Bernanos in its most spiritual and serious dimension . . . What for me counted just as much as "Blanche's fear" was the utterly Bernanosian idea of the Communion of the Saints and of the transfer of grace. That is why I tried to give so much importance to the scene where Constance, that adorable handmaiden of God, explains: "We do not die for ourselves alone, but for, or instead of, each other."¹

Poulenc embraced the underlying themes in Bernanos's dialogues, the foremost of which included the themes of fear, honor, and the mystical exchange of deaths between the Prioress and Blanche, which Poulenc called a "transfer of grace." In this chapter, I will discuss how Poulenc effectively emphasized these three themes through his discriminative condensing of the plot and further enhanced them through his musical treatment. In particular, I will focus on his use of specific musical material to reinforce the dramatic themes of fear and grace.

Dramatic Themes in Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*

Reducing Bernanos's poetically and spiritually rich text was no small feat for the composer. After careful consideration, Poulenc decided to cut about two-thirds of the revolutionary scenes as well as much of the religious exposition by the Carmelites' priest and prioresses for his opera. Jeremy Sams explained the result:

¹ Poulenc, *Cahiers de l'Herne* (Paris: Editions de l'Herne, 1961), 160, quoted in Gendre, "Dialogues des Carmélites: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera," 310.

While preserving the basic shape and sequence of Bernanos's scenario, he concentrated on the essences of the story, the interior workings of fear and martyrdom, and ruthlessly cut all the scenes he considered irrelevant, relegating minor nuns to the chorus and the townspeople to the wings.²

As I will show in chapter three, Poulenc was quite discriminating in his decision to eliminate, shorten, or alter several of Bernanos's scenes in order to enhance his own dramatic vision for the opera (see Appendix). The resulting story focuses emotionally on Blanche and her struggle to reconcile her fears with her aristocratic sense of honor, all while she moves ever closer to her predestined sacrifice at the guillotine. As such, the theme of fear in the opera primarily centers on Blanche, although it extends to affect several of the other characters, most prominently the first Prioress, but also all those whose lives and values are endangered by the Revolution. The theme of honor is split between Blanche and the other aristocratic member of her religious community, Marie de l'Incarnation, who must both, in their own ways, relinquish their sense of pride as they come to accept God's will for their respective lives over the course of the drama.

The third theme, that of vicarious suffering and the mystical exchange of deaths, was Poulenc's self-confessed focus, and it appears prominently in the organization of the opera. In his motivic analysis of the opera, Franz Rauhut construed that whereas Bernanos's original dialogues feature only one climax in terms of poetic thought, that being the agonizing death of the first Prioress, Poulenc created more than one climax in his opera.³ Each of the three acts, in fact, ends with a dramatic and musical climax, each focused on the theme of death. Siglind Bruhn explained,

Each of the three acts ends with a kind of expiatory death. In act I, the old prioress dies unwillingly "for Blanche"; in act II, the Christ child is symbolically once again destroyed for the redemption of humankind when the revolutionaries rob the clay figure of its cloak and crown and the frightened Blanche drops it on the

² Jeremy Sams, "From the Scaffold to La Scala: Jeremy Sams on Poulenc's 'Carmelites,'" *Opera* (1999): 516.

³ Rauhut, "Les motifs musicaux de l'opéra *Dialogues des Carmélites* de Francis Poulenc," 228.

floor; and in act III, the Carmelite sisters give their lives for the salvation of their people and their Church.⁴

Thus, as Poulenc probes into the nature and meaning of sacrifice and martyrdom, Constance's contention that "We do not die for ourselves alone, but for, or instead of, each other" becomes the veritable crux of the opera.

Motivic Material in *Dialogues des Carmélites*

Musically, Poulenc's opera is replete with repeated motivic material, of which several scholars—including Charles Herrold, Franz Rauhut, Jean de Solliers, Wilfrid Mellers, and Siglind Bruhn—have compiled catalogues.⁵ Collectively, they have identified well over thirty musical motives that not only maintain the musical coherence of the opera but also contribute to the drama. Although, as Charles Herrold observed, Poulenc's use of these motives is not consistent with the original Wagnerian concept of leitmotive, which implies a type of motivic development or transformation that is not present in Poulenc's opera, several of the repeated motives nevertheless have dramatic associations.⁶ Most often, the motives are used to evoke specific emotional states, but a few motives are associated with a specific character or group of characters in the drama.

Motives Associated with Fear

The most prominent musical motives in the opera are those associated with fear. Jean de Solliers has identified three such motives, which he has labeled "la Peur" (Fear), "l'Anxiété"

⁴ Bruhn, *Saints in the Limelight*, 168.

⁵ Herrold, "Francis Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*," 109–163; Rauhut, "Les motifs musicaux de l'opéra *Dialogues des Carmélites* de Francis Poulenc"; Jean de Solliers, "*Dialogues des Carmélites*: Commentaire musical et littéraire" *L'Avant-Scène Opéra* 52 (1983): 43–81; Mellers, *Francis Poulenc*, 104–128; Bruhn, *Saints in the Limelight*, 170–174.

⁶ Herrold, "Francis Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*," 109–110.

(Anxiety), and “la Crainte” (Panic) respectively (see ex. 1).⁷ Used principally to embody individual expressions of distress, these three motives, as Siglind Bruhn noted, are characterized by harmonic cross-relationship and contrary pitch motion.⁸ Wilfrid Mellers assigned the motives, and specifically their harmonic characteristics, even deeper meaning. He proposed that the “chords’ unrelatedness, and the *false* relations endemic to them, suggest a lack of center and of the direction inherent in tonal progression” and thereby imply both the social instability of the Revolution as well as Blanche’s own lost state.⁹

EXAMPLE 1 Motives associated with fear¹⁰

The image displays three musical examples of motives associated with fear, each presented in a piano-vocal score format with a treble and bass clef staff. The first example, labeled "Peur" motive, shows a sequence of five triads in a chromatic progression, with the first two being major chords a minor third apart, followed by three more triads descending by half steps. The second example, labeled "Anxiété" motive, consists of two major chords a minor third apart, followed by two more major chords descending by half steps. The third example, labeled "Crainte" motive, features a sequence of four major chords, with the first two being a minor third apart and the last two descending by half steps.

The first of these motives—the “Peur” motive—is used in a variety of contexts to enunciate feelings of fear, uncertainty, and doubt, as well as to articulate the pronounced tension between the conflicting worlds of the opera (for example, the cloistered world of the Carmelites in contrast to the social upheaval of the Revolution, or childlike faith as opposed to agonizing doubt). The “Peur” motive features a chromatic progression of five triads in a non-functional, sequential relationship. In its primary form, the motive consists of a sequence of two major chords a minor third apart that are then repeated sequentially one half step lower. The soprano

⁷ Solliers, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: Commentaire musical et littéraire,” 45.

⁸ Bruhn, *Saints in the Limelight*, 170.

⁹ Mellers, *Francis Poulenc*, 106–107.

¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted, the musical examples used in this study come from the piano vocal score of Francis Poulenc, *Dialogues of the Carmelites* (opera in three acts and twelve scenes), text of the drama by Georges Bernanos (vocal score), ed. Joseph Machlis (New York: Ricordi, 1979).

voice of the motive features a chromatically alternating descent that adds a retreating, chromatic character to the motive, despite the figure's otherwise overt diatonicism.

The “Peur” motive appears prominently throughout Act I, scene 1, in the initial portrayals of Blanche. Even before Blanche appears on stage, the conversation between her father and brother reveals that she lives in conflict with her world, a theme that is emphasized by the first three appearances of the “Peur” motive. The motive is introduced when the Chevalier expresses concern for his sister as she drives through the revolutionary mobs (Act I, scene 1, cue 4), and it returns several measures later when the Marquis describes her traumatic birth under similar circumstances (Act I, scene 1, cues 9 and 10). Blanche, born in fear, is destined to be always at odds with her world; as she relates to her father, “I do not scorn the world; the world is simply, for me, an element in which I cannot live” (Act I, scene 1, cue 29).¹¹ A similar, though less neurotic, sentiment is expressed by the First Commissioner in Act II, scene 4, which Poulenc also marks by the use of the “Peur” motive. The motive appears once in the strings and then is immediately repeated by the upper woodwinds when the commissioner, having confided in Mother Marie that he holds a sympathetic alliance with the persecuted Church, laments that despite years of service as a sacristan in the parish of Chelles, he is now forced to “howl with the wolves” (Act II, scene 4, cue 83; see ex. 2). The world of Blanche de la Force and her compatriots is one polarized by opposing political, social, and religious beliefs, and Blanche's story, on one level, is her attempt to situate herself within that polarity. The final appearance of the motive emphasizes the depth of this division. In Act III, scene 3, Poulenc uses the motive, here marked “*très lourd et pesant*” (very heavy), to express the fear that overcomes the

¹¹ For in-text quotations from Poulenc's opera, I have chosen to use Michael Legat's translation of Bernanos's dialogues as opposed to the English singing translation for the opera that appears in the published scores and libretti.

imprisoned Carmelites after they hear their official death sentence pronounced by the Revolutionary Tribunal (Act III, scene 3, cue 52).

EXAMPLE 2 Act II, scene 4, cue 83

1st Commissioner

Mais il faut bien que je hurle a - vec les loups!
 Yet I've no choice but to howl with the wolves!

Even more significant, however, is the motive's use to signify internal conflict and fear. Although the initial usage of the "Peur" motive to characterize Blanche hints at such signification, its appearance in the Prioress's death scene (Act I, scene 4) solidifies the motive's connection with feelings of doubt and uncertainty when it is used to accompany the Prioress's poignant expressions of spiritual abandonment. This entire scene is replete with musical indications of anguish. The scene opens and ends with a hammering, arpeggiated ostinato in B minor, which is distinguished particularly by the ascending minor third in the bass register that opens the motive. Due to the ostinato's use to frame the Prioress's death scene and its reappearance in Act III, scene 4, to accompany the Carmelites' solemn march to the guillotine, this motive bears direct associations with death.¹² In addition to this "Death" ostinato, chromatically dissolving strings and a general proliferation of dissonance articulate the Prioress's

¹² The "Death" ostinato makes its first appearance in Act I, scene 3, when Constance speaks of the imminent death of the Prioress (cue 68). Furthermore, it returns intermittently throughout Act II of the opera as a reminder of the Prioress's death agony and a prefiguration of the Carmelites' communal martyrdom (see Act II, scene 1, cue 15; Act II, scene 3, cue 48; Act II, scene 4, cues 63 and 78; and Act III, scene 3, cue 47).

lingering anguish. As the Prioress's death agony intensifies, she first pleads for another dose of the medicine that had previously relieved her. When it is denied, she loses control and renounces God in a wildly leaping arioso above a sparse orchestral accompaniment that, notably, concludes with an iteration of the "Peur" motive (Act I, scene 4, cue 111): "Who am I at this moment, wretched as I am, to concern myself with Him! Let Him first concern Himself with me!" As Wilfrid Mellers observed, "Significantly, when the Prioress momentarily recovers articulacy sufficient to upbraid God for having forsaken her, it is to the unrelated concords, now fortissimo, that had been associated with Blanche's hysteria" (Act I, scene 4, cue 115; see ex. 3).¹³

Exhausted by her blasphemous outburst, the Prioress then collapses, and the remainder of the scene consists of semi-articulate moans from the Prioress that punctuate Mother Marie's appalled recitative.

EXAMPLE 3 Act I, scene 4, cue 115

The Prioress
Presser *ff* *mf* *céder*

Oh! oh!
A-las!

Dieu nos dé-lais-se!
God has forsaken us,

Dieu nous re-nonce!
God has renounced us!

ff *f* *mf*

The musical connection between Blanche and the dying Prioress is further reinforced by another, earlier appearance of the motive. In Act I, scene 2, during the Prioress's initial interview with the then-prospective nun, Blanche had revealed her intended Carmelite name—"Sister

¹³ Mellers, *Francis Poulenc*, 112.

Blanche of the Agony of Christ”—to the softly muted strains of a variant of the “Peur” motive (Act I, scene 2, cue 49). Two scenes and several weeks later, the Prioress, recalling this initial interview, asks Mother Marie whether Blanche is still resolved to keep her chosen religious name. Following Mother Marie’s affirmative reply, the Prioress reveals her own intimate connection with the name. She had chosen it herself as a young postulant, although her Prioress, Madame Arnoult, had questioned the choice. “Question your strength,” Madame Arnoult warned. “Those who enter upon Gethsemane may not leave it” (Act I, scene 4, cue 88). As the Prioress relates Madame Arnoult’s final question, the orchestra repeats the probing “Peur” motive no less than four times, beginning at an agitated fortissimo and gradually diminishing in both volume and tempo: “Have you the courage to remain to the end the prisoner of the Holy Agony?” (Act I, scene 4, cue 88; see ex. 4). Franz Rauhut aptly described the significance of this appearance of the motive:

Here there is a profound and complex significance: we must not forget that Blanche wanted to bear and obtained the religious name “Sister Blanche of the Agony of Christ”; now, the Prioress herself is dying with the sense of this abandonment of God, by which Jesus was overwhelmed during the Passion, and it is this religious anguish that unites the Prioress and Blanche, between themselves and with the Savior.¹⁴

¹⁴ “Il y a là un sens, profond et complexe: nous ne devons pas oublier que Blanche a désiré et obtenu de porter en religion le nom de ‘sœur Blanche de l’Agonie du Christ’; maintenant, la Prieure elle-même est en train de mourir avec le sentiment de cet abandon de Dieu, dont Jésus fut accablé Durant la Passion; et c’est cette angoisse religieuse qui réunit la Prieure et Blanche, entre elles et avec le Saveur.” Rauhut, “Les motifs musicaux de l’opéra *Dialogues des Carmélites* de Francis Poulenc,” 224.

EXAMPLE 4 Act I, scene 4, cue 88

The Prioress
Presser

Vous sen - tez vous le cou - ra - ge de res - ter jus - qu'au
Are you con - vinced you have the courage to re - main, till the

bout pri - son - niè - re de la très Sainte A - go - nie?
end, a pris - on - er of that most Holy Agony of Christ?

ff *f* *p* céder

The other two motives associated with fear add further dimensions to the underlying feelings of doubt, uncertainty, and spiritual anguish established by the “Peur” motive. The second of this group of motives, the “Anxiété” motive, first appears immediately following an iteration of the “Peur” motive (Act I, scene 1, cue 10) and, like the “Peur” motive, also consists of a sequence of tonally unrelated chords. The “Anxiété” motive is comprised of two sequential seventh chords—a major-minor seventh chord and a minor seventh chord—that appear in a non-functional tritonic relationship (see ex. 1). The “Anxiété” motive frequently appears in connection with the passive or submissive aspects of Blanche’s fear. For example, its first

appearance accompanies the “Peur” motive when the Marquis explains the traumatic nature of Blanche’s birth, which had presumably condemned her to a life marked by consuming, neurotic fear (Act I, scene 1, cue 10). It returns to compliment Blanche’s voiced concerns about the encroaching darkness (Act I, scene 1, cues 20 and 25), and later inhibits her articulacy at the Prioress’s death (Act I, scene 4, cue 121). “The Reverend Mother wishes . . .” Blanche begins, but, consumed by fear, she cannot finish her sentence. Additionally, the motive appears underneath the two references to how Blanche’s pervasive fear resembles an illness, thereby metaphorically implying that Blanche has minimal control over her fear (see Act I, scene 1, cue 14, and Act II, scene 4, cue 70).

The most significant use of the motive, however, occurs, in Act III, scene 1, when Mother Marie proposes the vow of martyrdom. Here, the “Anxiété” motive forms a backdrop to Mother Marie’s instructions that “the opposition of a single one of you would be enough for me to abandon the idea forthwith” (Act III, scene 1, cue 10) and then returns when she reveals the results of the secret vote: “There is a single vote in opposition. That is enough” (Act III, scene 1, cue 13). Bernanos’s stage directions clarify this scene’s narrative substantially and reveal that he intended Blanche to appear here as a passive pawn, any contributing actions on her part now being completely inhibited by her overpowering fear.¹⁵ Immediately after Mother Marie proposes the vow, and before she announces the secret vote, Bernanos indicates:

For some minutes Constance has been looking, first surreptitiously and then openly at Blanche de la Force. Blanche looks very tired. It should be apparent that she will from now on be the plaything of circumstances, and that, in any case, she would never dare to oppose her companions in public.¹⁶

¹⁵ Notably, in his score to the opera, Poulenc incorporated many of the stage directions from Bernanos’s published dialogues. These stage directions were largely taken from Bruckberger and Agostini’s scenario and were either recopied by Bernanos into his manuscript or added by Béguin as he prepared Bernanos’s dialogues for publication.

¹⁶ Bernanos, “Dialogues des Carmélites,” 127–128.

As Blanche and her sisters cast their votes, Blanche's face looks even more haggard "(it could be that of a person who has just made up her mind by the toss of a coin)," in Bernanos's description.¹⁷ Then, when Constance reveals that she, not Blanche, cast the single opposing vote, the accompanying stage directions, which Poulenc incorporated into his score, indicate, "General stupefaction. Blanche begins to weep, her head in her hands."¹⁸ With the proposed vow of martyrdom now certain, Blanche is patently overcome by her fears and ultimately flees the convent in the hope of finding refuge elsewhere.

In Bernanos's text, this scene marks the apparent end of Blanche's struggle against her fears and the beginning of her complete submission to them. A handful of previous scenes in Bernanos's dialogues, all of which were eliminated by Poulenc in his condensed text, had prepared this decisive moment (see Appendix). These additional scenes portray Blanche's efforts to conquer her fears, for example, as she finds confidence in her association with Mother Marie and the second Prioress (Tableau III, scene xiv; Tableau IV, scene ix) and later when she assigns religious significance to her distinctive weakness (Tableau IV, scene vi). More specifically, these scenes show the young novice's efforts becoming evidently more demanding until she finally admits to the second Prioress, "I no longer have any hope of surmounting my nature" (Tableau IV, scene vi).¹⁹

In cutting these scenes, Poulenc lost an aspect of Blanche's neurotic breakdown, but he recovers it through his poignant musical treatment of the scene depicting the vow of martyrdom (Act III, scene 1). Two motives figure prominently throughout the scene. The first is the musical material that opens the scene: an upward thrusting, double-dotted figure that has been associated with Mother Marie since her appearance on stage in Act I, scene 4 (see ex. 5). In its several

¹⁷ Ibid., 128.

¹⁸ Ibid., 129.

¹⁹ Ibid., 111.

iterations throughout the opera, this “Mother Marie” motive appears above a harmonically static bass, which is frequently punctuated with a repeated syncopated or, as is the case in Act III, scene 1, double-dotted rhythmic accent. The second motive that pervades Act III, scene 1, is a descending gesture in a minor tonality with a characteristic thirty-second note rhythmic pattern, which Keith Daniel and Bertold Hummel have noted as being reminiscent of the religious music of the Baroque period (see ex. 6).²⁰ Like the “Mother Marie” motive, this “Religious” motive was also introduced earlier in the opera; it was heard briefly at the beginning of Act II, scene 1, to represent musically the Carmelites’ religious community. In Act III, scene 1, during the vow of martyrdom, the pervasive alternation of the “Mother Marie” and “Religious” motives reflects Blanche’s concealed dilemma. Caught between her nearly debilitating fear of death and Mother Marie’s zealous promotion of a vow of martyrdom that her Carmelite sisters would eagerly sustain, Blanche feels completely isolated. In such an environment, she could never, as Bernanos indicated, “dare to oppose her companions in public,” and her diffidence is evidenced by a corresponding lack of music associated with her character, with the limited exception of the two iterations of the “Anxiété” motive. In fact, Blanche remains silent throughout the entire duration of the scene, her lack of voice signifying her powerlessness over her current circumstances.

EXAMPLE 5 Act I, scene 4, cue 81; “Mother Marie” motive



²⁰ Additionally, as Keith Daniel explained, this rhythmic figure “is prominent in many mature Poulenc works, and it generally carries a religious connotation.” Daniel, *Francis Poulenc*, 300, 351; Rauhut, “Les motifs musicaux de l’opéra *Dialogues des Carmélites* de Francis Poulenc,” 228.

EXAMPLE 6 Act III, scene 1, cue 1; “Religious” motive



While the secret vote is being cast, however, the music shifts its focus to express Blanche’s emotional turmoil and hidden feelings of shame, although this is still through the use of the “Mother Marie” and “Religious” motives (Act III, scene 1, cue 12). Wilfrid Mellers described the motives’ transformation as a change “from the grandeur of the opening of the act into wildly modulatory music that is heroic but tormented, with the baroque demisemi-quaver [thirty-second note] ‘flourish’ [the “Religious” motive] now more savage than civilized.”²¹ When the priest accepts Constance’s pleas to negate her opposing vote and begins giving the Carmelites instructions for taking the vow, the musical intensity is momentarily dispersed into a series of “*très doux et très calme*” (very soft and very calm) pulsating chords (Act III, scene 1, cue 14), but the “heroic but tormented” double-dotted motive returns as Blanche despairingly flees the convent during the brief orchestral postlude (cue 15). The increasing sense of agitation during the secret vote and the orchestral postlude, combined with the use of the “Anxiété” motive, which had earlier depicted Blanche’s lack of control, reveals Blanche’s ultimate submission to her fears at the end of this scene, thereby making her heroic decision to join her sisters in death all the more poignant.

The third motive associated with fear—the “Crainte” motive—is characterized by a chromatic descent in the soprano line, which, in its principal form, is accompanied by contrary

²¹ Mellers, *Francis Poulenc*, 121.

chromatic motion in the bass (see ex. 1). It appears most often with a limited orchestration and frequently with an emphasis on somber wind colors (such as double reeds, horns, and trombones). The “Crainte” motive’s dual chromaticism gives it an ominous atonal character. Accordingly, this motive seems the most appropriate to evoke the poignancy and depth of Blanche’s fears, which Poulenc does quite effectively. The “Crainte” motive is particularly connected with Blanche—Franz Rauhut even identifies this motive as Blanche’s signature motive—and accordingly, it is heard underneath references to Blanche’s timidity (e.g., Act I, scene 1, cue 14) as well as to her character in general (e.g., Act I, scene 4, cues 93 and 94).²² Like the “Peur” motive, this motive is also appropriated by the Prioress during her death scene; it is heard as the Prioress laments that in her nearly unbearable suffering, she is hardly fit to be seen by her beloved daughters (Act I, scene 4, cue 109).

Of the three motives associated with fear, it is this motive, the highly chromatic “Crainte” motive that dominates Blanche’s final meeting with Mother Marie at the *Hôtel de la Force* (Act III, scene 2) following Blanche’s impulsive flight from the convent at the end of Act II. Mother Marie had come to persuade Blanche to enter into her protection, but Blanche repeatedly refused to leave, appearing almost dissident in her opposition. The Blanche of this scene has changed substantially since her last appearance on stage. In the interim, she witnessed her father’s death on the guillotine and furtively became an ill-treated servant in her own home to avoid detection from the revolutionary mobs. She has given herself wholly to her fears and her sense of inadequacy, and in so doing, she has become overpowered by intense feelings of shame and self-hatred. Her acute internal conflict is paralleled by the increasing violence of the Revolution, and the combined atmosphere of agitation is indicated musically by the distraught dotted rhythms and prevalence of diminished tonalities that open the scene (Act III, scene 2, cue 24).

²² Rauhut, “Les motifs musicaux de l’opéra *Dialogues des Carmélites* de Francis Poulenc,” 217.

The remainder of the scene sounds musically unstable as it fluctuates violently between disjunct interjections of the agitated opening motive, Mother Marie’s pleading recitative, and Blanche’s distressed replies. The “Crainte” motive appears first in fragments. The first hint appears shortly before cue 26 when Blanche questions her safety with Mother Marie, then again eight measures later when Blanche indicates that she feels exhausted. As Blanche regains a measure of confidence, enough, at least, to be able to speak more freely to Mother Marie about her feelings, the motive, and consequently Blanche’s recitative, becomes somewhat less disjunct and eventually she embraces the full contour of a variant of the “Crainte” motive (Act III, scene 2, cues 30 and 31; see ex. 7). Blanche’s disclosures here reveal another, even deeper layer to her fears. Having accepted her cowardice, Blanche now also accepts the disgrace that accompanies it. She feels unworthy of her noble birth, of her honor, and she despises herself for it. Like the dying Prioress, Blanche feels ashamed because of her suffering: “I was born in fear, I have lived in it, I still live in it, and as everyone despises fear it is right that I should live also in contempt” (Act III, scene 2, cue 31). Fear, doubt, uncertainty, religious anguish, shame, and despair—all infect Blanche like a debilitating illness, which, in the end, she can conquer only through the help of divine grace.

EXAMPLE 7 Act III, scene 2, cue 31; variant of “Crainte” motive

Blanche

tout le mon - de mé-pri - se la peur, il est donc jus - te que je vive aus - si dans le mé - pris.
 As every - one - de - spis - es fear, it is right that I should live also in con - tempt.

Motives Associated with Grace

Like fear, grace and the mystical exchange of deaths are represented in the opera musically through a collection of motives that connect Blanche with the three individuals whose sacrifices prepare a way for her to overcome her fears and accept her predestined role as the last at the scaffold. The most obvious “transference of grace” is the mystical connection between Blanche and the Prioress, who are united not only through their mystically shared fear and the motives associated with it, but also in their exchange of deaths one for another. Franz Rauhut identified two specific motives associated with this exchange of deaths, which he named “Gift of life for another” and “Death in the place of another” respectively (see exs. 8 and 9).²³ Whereas the motive associated with “Death in the place of another” occurs only once, during Constance’s profound avowal of the mystical powers of grace (Act II, scene 1, cue 17), the “Gift of life for another” appears throughout the opera to reinforce the theme of vicarious sacrifice. It is heard when Constance proposes that she and Blanche offer their lives for the dying Prioress (Act I, scene 3, cue 70), when Mother Marie proclaims that the people need martyrs willing to offer their lives for the preservation of the France and the Church (Act II, scene 4, cue 81), and when the priest instructs Mother Marie to sacrifice her desire for martyrdom and accept the will of God (Act III, scene 3, cue 59).

EXAMPLE 8 Act I, scene 3, cue 70; “Gift of life for another” motive



²³ Rauhut, “Les motifs musicaux de l’opéra *Dialogues des Carmélites* de Francis Poulenc,” 222, 228–229.

EXAMPLE 9 Act II, scene 1, cue 17; “Death in the place of another” motive

Violin I

Clarinet

[Constance: On ne meurt pas chacun pour soi, mais les uns poue les autres, ou même les uns à la place des autres,]

Although Poulenc’s opera primarily emphasizes the “transfer of grace” between Blanche and the first Prioress evidenced in their exchange of deaths, it does not completely expunge Gertrud von Le Fort’s original intention to bind Blanche and Mother Marie through their sacrifices. In part, Mother Marie’s forfeiture of her martyrdom does yet bring Blanche additional strength when she faces her own impending death. The use of the “Gift of life for another” motive in Act III, scene 3, to underscore the priest’s direction to Mother Marie to sacrifice her desire for martyrdom hints at this connection (Act III, scene 3, cue 59). It is the music associated with the vow of martyrdom, however, that illuminates just how linked the two nuns are. As discussed, Act III, scene 1, the scene during which the Carmelites take Mother Marie’s proposed vow, includes three main groups of musical material: the strident, dotted motive that refers to Mother Marie; the descending “Religious” motive associated with the Carmelite community; and two motives connected with Blanche and her fears (the “Anxiété” and “Crainte” motives). Poulenc integrated one additional motive into this collection of musical material, which, as he himself indicated on the score, refers to the vow of martyrdom (see ex. 10). It appears three times in the opera: first when Mother Marie initially proposes the vow in Act III, scene 1 (cue 5); then, two scenes later, marked “Tempo exact du ‘vœu du martyre,’” when Mother Marie recalls the vow that she had made during her conversation with the priest (Act III, scene 3, cue 60); and finally in the interlude that immediately precedes the final scene (Act III, scene 4, cue 62). As Charles Herrold noted, the “Vow of martyrdom” motive is related to motivic material that is

associated with Blanche and her fears. It is, in fact, an inverted variant of the “Crainte” motive.²⁴

The musical relationship between the “Crainte” and “Vow of martyrdom” motives suggests a connection between Mother Marie and Blanche and, more specifically, the characters’ respective weaknesses—Mother Marie’s overzealous desire for martyrdom and Blanche’s consuming fear.

EXAMPLE 10 Act III, scene 1, cue 5; “Vow of martyrdom” motive

Mother Marie

Je pro - po - se que nous fas-sions en - sem - ble le voeu du mar - ty - re
I pro-pose that we take up - on our- selves_ The vow of mar-tyr - dom

pour mé - ri - ter le main-tien du Car - mel et le sa - lut de no - tre pa - trie.
so that we'll mer - it the safe - ty and wel - fare of our or - der and_ our land.

The third individual involved in Blanche’s transfer of grace is Constance who, Joseph Kestner explained, “deliberately votes against the vow of martyrdom so that Blanche will have the courage to vote for it.”²⁵ The two young postulants are united musically through a lyrical, modulatory figure that several scholars, including Siglind Bruhn, Wilfrid Mellers, and Jean de Solliers, have associated with Blanche (see ex. 11). Blanche sings this motive only once, however, when she expresses her hope that “perhaps danger is akin to cold water—it takes your breath away at first, but is not as disagreeable when you have plunged in up to your neck” (Act I,

²⁴ Herrold, “Francis Poulenc’s *Dialogues des Carmelites*,” 115, 155–156.

²⁵ Joseph Kestner, “The Scaffold of Honor: The Strength to Conquer Fear Figures as a Central Theme in the Carmelite Dialogues of Bernanos and Poulenc,” *Opera News* 45, no. 9 (1981): 27.

scene 1, cue 19). All subsequent iterations of this motive appear in connection with Constance. In four instances, the motive accompanies Constance's premonition that she and Blanche will die together (see Act I, scene 3, cues 71 and 72; Act II, scene 1, cue 16; and Act III, scene 3, cue 46). It returns in the final scene when Blanche appears, her face stripped of fear, to fulfill Constance's prophecy and keep her vow of martyrdom (Act III, scene 3, cue 72). Far from referring to Blanche alone, this motive marks, I believe, the shared death of Constance and Blanche, which is made possible through all three episodes involving divine grace. In this context, Blanche's statement that danger is like a douche of cold water becomes portentous, for in the end, Blanche does find the strength to overcome her initial anxiety and literally "plunge in up to her neck."

EXAMPLE 11 Act I, scene 1, cue 19; "Shared death" motive

Blanche

Mon Dieu, il en est peut être du pé - ril com-me de l'eau froi - de qui d'a-bord vous
Good Lord, one jumps in - to dan - ger just the same as in - to the o - cean, first it knocks the

très doux et lié

cou - pe le souf - fle et où l'on se trouva l'ai - se, dès qu'on y est en tré jus-qu'au cou.
breath from your bo - dy then it be - comes most re - fresh - ing af - ter you've gone in up to your neck.

Framing the entire opera is a brief, ascending motive that Franz Rauhut has labeled “Nobility and honor” (see ex. 12).²⁶ In his insightful interpretation, Rauhut argues that this motive transforms during the course of the opera in representation of the changing nature of Blanche’s honor. At the opening of the opera, the ascending, three-note motive is sounded at a forceful *allegro giocoso*, performed fortissimo and staccato by the upper and lower factions of the orchestra in alternation above a sustained E-minor ninth chord in the double reeds (beginning of Act I, scene 1). In this statement, the motive sounds powerful, even proud, in emulation of the noble House of de la Force. After this first violent statement, the motive reappears later in the scene, shortly before Blanche’s first entrance, in a more subdued form, now at a slower tempo and colored with extended harmonies (Act I, scene 1, cue 11). As the Marquis reflects on the sociopolitical turmoil of the mounting Revolution, the “Nobility and honor” motive is repeated sequentially in descending whole steps above a non-functional fifth-relation progression of ninth chords. The descending sequence gives this statement of the motive an almost modulatory character, perhaps to suggest the instability of the French nobility and hint at the need for a redefinition of honor due to the growing revolutionary unrest. Although the “Nobility and honor” motive assumes this modulatory form when it returns later in the opera to accompany references to the now clearly threatened “Old World” of the French aristocracy (see Act II, interlude 2, cue 38; Act II, scene 3, cue 43; and Act III, scene 2, cue 32), in this scene, the de la Force family is depicted as still strongly clinging to the aristocratic world of their ancestors, as evidenced dramatically by the Marquis’s reassurances that the mobs will do no great harm to his family and musically by the recurrence of the initial, forceful form of the motive when the Chevalier leaves the scene to question one of the family’s servants (Act I, scene 1, cue 24).

²⁶ Rauhut, “Les motifs musicaux de l’opéra *Dialogues des Carmélites* de Francis Poulenc,” 215.

EXAMPLE 12 Beginning of Act I, scene 1; “Nobility and honor” motive²⁷

At the beginning of the opera, Blanche understands honor only in its connection with nobility and, more specifically, in the context of the aristocratic world of her ancestors. She recognizes her consuming fear as being incompatible with such an aristocratic sense of honor and decides to enter Carmel in order to regain the honor she fears she has lost. At the end of Act I, scene 1, Blanche pleads, “I sacrifice everything to [God], abandon everything, renounce everything, so that He may restore my honor” (Act I, scene 1, cue 33). Following Blanche’s earnest plea, a slow variant of the “Nobility and honor” motive is presented in the upper winds and harp above a shimmering, sustained A-minor ninth chord in the strings as a musical reinforcement of Blanche’s expression of her consuming desire for honor (Act I, scene 1, cue 33). The motive appears here in a variant that prefigures its final form at the conclusion of the opera, its ascent outlining a minor seventh chord with a missing fifth. At this point in the opera, at the end of Act I, scene 1, Blanche likely equates her anticipated restoration of honor with a divine bestowal of courage sufficient to overcome her fears. The final appearance of the “Nobility and honor” motive at the conclusion of this scene, in a form similar to the variant that will end the opera and signify the fulfillment of Blanche’s quest for honor, hints at the

²⁷ This musical example is my own reduction of the excerpt taken from the full orchestral score. Poulenc, *Dialogues des Carmélites/Dialoghi delle Carmelitane*, 1.

transformation that Blanche's sense of honor will undergo during her vocation in Carmel as it acquires a religious significance.

Throughout the second act of the opera, Blanche slowly realizes that she will not find sufficient courage in Carmel to rise above her fears and find a "heroic life."²⁸ Instead, her fears continue to plague her, and eventually, she gives up hope of ever conquering them. As she cries in Act III, scene 3, "I was born in fear, I have lived in it, I still live in it, and as everyone despises fear it is right that I should live also in contempt" (cue 31). In the concluding scene of the opera, however, Blanche finally does sacrifice, abandon, and renounce everything, giving not only her will but also her fears to God. By doing so, she gains a sense of divine honor, an honor, Rauhut explained, that is completely different from the honor that she had initially imagined.²⁹

The "Nobility and honor" motive also undergoes a "divine" transformation as it too acquires a religious significance. Its appearance at the end of Act I, scene 1, prefigures the motive's final form at the end of the opera (see ex. 13), which signifies, according to Rauhut, "honor and religion together, an honor sublimated in the religious."³⁰ Similar forms of the motive appear at various points throughout the opera, most notably during the second Prioress's final words to her daughters. Her address hints at the religious nature of Blanche's fear and the transformation that she will soon undergo: "On the Mount of Olives, Christ was no longer master. He knew the fear of death" (Act III, scene 2, cue 45).

²⁸ Bernanos, "Dialogues des Carmélites," 62.

²⁹ Rauhut, "Les motifs musicaux de l'opéra *Dialogues des Carmélites* de Francis Poulenc," 220–221.

³⁰ "C'est une mutation essentielle de 'Noblesse et honneur' en ce sens que cela signifie Honneur et Religion, ensemble, un honneur sublimé dans le religieux." *Ibid.*, 220.

EXAMPLE 13 Act III, scene 3, cue 75; Religious variant of the “Nobility and honor” motive³¹

The musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is for Violas, the middle for Oboes, and the bottom for piano accompaniment. The Violas part begins with a melodic line marked 'espress.' and is followed by the Oboes. The piano accompaniment features a sustained C-minor seventh chord with crotales, marked 'pp' and 'ppp'. The music is in 3/4 time and features a sustained C-minor seventh chord with crotales.

The religious form of the “Nobility and honor” motive, however, is not fully integrated into the opera until the final scene of Act III. In the last seven measures of the opera, the motive is presented twice: first by the harp and violas and then by the oboes (Act III, scene iv, cue 75). Both statements of the motive are performed in an expressive legato and doubled at the octave above a quietly sustained C-minor seventh chord made ethereal by the addition of crotales. Unlike all previous iterations of the “Nobility and honor” motive, this last variant begins on the first beat of the measure, and the added weight of the metric placement adds a sense of stability and finality that had not previously accompanied the motive. Moreover, the motive now spans an octave, beginning and ending on the tonic C, whereas in many of its earlier iterations (at the beginning of Act I, scene 1, or at Act II, scene 3, cue 62, for example), the motive’s ascent had encompassed a ninth. In his analysis, Rauhut interpreted the intervallic transformation as being symbolic of the divine. The consonant unity and lack of tension in this final presentation of the “Nobility and honor” motive, he intimated, represents “the heavenly ascension of Blanche, from the ‘Honor’ of the aristocracy to the elevation of this ‘Gloria’ of God, of which she sings.”³²

³¹ This musical example is my own reduction of the excerpt taken from the full orchestral version of the score. Poulenc, *Dialogues des Carmelites/Dialoghi delle Carmelitane*, 518.

³² “C’est ainsi que le tout dernier motif représente l’ascension céleste de Blanche, partant de l’‘Honneur’ de sa Maison noble et s’élevant à cette ‘Gloria’ de Dieu, qu’elle vient de chanter.” *Ibid.*, 243–244.

Through divine grace, Blanche learns the religious meaning of honor, and through her sacrifice, she attains the heroism that she had earlier sought.

In these last moments of the opera, Blanche is transformed from a fearful, neurotic creature into a symbolic messenger of hope. With her fears now expunged and her honor restored through a divine transference of grace, Blanche is now free to appear fortuitously at the scaffold in order to support Constance at her final moments. Seeing Blanche's presence brings Constance added strength; the directions in the score indicate that upon seeing Blanche, Constance's face radiates happiness, and she resumes her march to the guillotine with a serene smile. In a scene from Bernanos's dialogues that did not make it into Poulenc's opera, the Prioress acknowledged, "It is not Faith which gives us strength, but Love."³³ In this intimate moment, it seems that Blanche's sacrifice is enabled not only through grace and faith, but also through her love for Constance and her other Carmelite sisters. Considering Poulenc's poignant conclusion to his opera, Arthur Holmberg asserted,

Bernanos's play and Poulenc's opera are an affirmation of hope and faith. While not denying the real presence of evil and the violent nature to which man can easily revert, *Dialogues* nevertheless demonstrates that such virtues as loyalty, service and a sense of brotherhood can survive in a world dominated by cruelty and self-seeking.³⁴

³³ Bernanos, "Dialogues des Carmélites," 67.

³⁴ Arthur Holmberg, "Confrontation with the Self—Spiritual Growth is the Real Concern of *Dialogues of the Carmelites*," *Opera News* 43 (1979): 15.

CHAPTER III: A QUESTION OF POLITICS

In their individual incarnations of the story of the Carmelites of Compiègne, Gertrud von Le Fort and Georges Bernanos each presented not only their own artistic interpretation of the nuns' historic martyrdom, but also a personal statement about the plight of the modern world and, in particular, that of postwar Europe. Gertrud von Le Fort's account of the inspiration for her novella patently reveals her intention to represent allegorically the contemporary problems of Weimar Germany by repositioning her fears within the historical context of the French Revolution. Although Bernanos's adaptation of the story appears to be less overtly political, when considered in the context of his wartime works and political philosophy, his poignant treatment of Blanche and her redemption from her fears in *Dialogues des Carmélites* reveals his concerns for postwar Europe and more particularly his anxieties regarding the contemporary struggle to preserve Christian faith and values in a world beset by corruption, inhumanity, and despair.¹ Despite the rich political connections in both Le Fort's and Bernanos's versions of the story, however, Poulenc's opera has largely defied political commentary. Scholars and critics have concentrated instead on the spiritual aspect of the opera, which, as evidenced by the musical analysis in chapter two, appears to have been Poulenc's major focus. In this chapter, I first explore the political connections in Le Fort's novella and Bernanos's dialogues to establish the story's rich political heritage. Then, I examine Poulenc's opera and propose several explanations for its comparative lack of political material.

¹ Specifically, I will reference Bernanos's *Les Grandes cimetières sous la lune* (1938), *Scandale de la Vérité* (1939), and *La France contre les robots* (1944), as well as several excerpts from his published correspondence.

Gertrud von Le Fort Against Totalitarianism

As discussed in chapter one, Gertrud von Le Fort conceived *Blanche* as an embodiment of her personal and profound fears of the changes in contemporary society—in Le Fort’s own words, the “incarnation of man’s anguish faced with an entire era moving inexorably towards its end.”² Living within the precarious political and social climate of Weimar Germany, Le Fort experienced firsthand the social anxiety and general mood of crisis that followed the decline and fall of the Second Reich. Helena Tomko, in her study of German Catholic literature in the Weimar Republic and Third Reich, described the period as one marked by “a general climate of fear, the rejection of socialism in its various guises, and anxiety about the disappearance of the monarchy into a new political form altogether”—that is, themes that reappear in not only Le Fort’s novella, but also in the writings of other German intellectuals of the period.³ The existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers, for example, wrote fervently about the prevailing feelings of angst that haunted contemporary man in his widely discussed *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* (literally, *The Spiritual Situation of the Time*, translated as *Man in the Modern Age*; 1931):

A *Lebensangst* perhaps unparalleled in its intensity is the terrifying companion of the modern man. He is worried about his own vital existence, which, being threatened now more than ever before, has become the center of his attention; and he has the entirely different fear of his own self, which he cannot bring himself to face.⁴

² Le Fort, *Aufzeichnungen und Erinnerungen*, 93–95, quoted in Gendreau, “*Dialogues des Carmélites*: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera,” 279.

³ Helena M. Tomko, *Sacramental Realism: Gertrud von Le Fort and German Catholic Literature in the Weimar Republic and Third Reich (1924–46)* (London: Maney, 2007), 89.

⁴ “Eine vielleicht so noch nie gewesene Lebensangst ist der unheimliche Begleiter des modernen Menschen. Er hat Angst um sein vitales Eigendasein, das, stets bedroht, stärker als jemals in das Zentrum der Aufmerksamkeit getreten ist; und er hat die ganz andere Angst um sein Selbstsein, zu dem er sich nicht aufschwingt.“ Karl Jaspers, *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1931), quoted in Goslich, *Orientierungssuche im Zeitalter der Angst*, 120.

Other Weimar intellectuals, among them the novelist Hermann Hesse, lamented the sense of cultural desperation and moral depravity that had emerged in interwar Europe. In a 1926 article, Hesse described this crisis, which, he contended, left mankind “longing for a worldview,” thus:

The new image of the earth’s surface, completely transformed and recast in just a few decades, and the enormous changes manifest in every city and every landscape of the world since industrialization, correspond to an upheaval in the human mind. This development has so accelerated in the years since the outbreak of the world war that one can already, without exaggeration, identify the death and dismantling of the culture into which the elder among us were raised as children and which then seemed to us eternal and indestructible. . . . Irreplaceable things have been lost and destroyed forever; new, unheard-of things are being imagined in their place. Destroyed and lost for the greater part of the civilized world are, beyond all else, the two universal foundations of life, culture and morality: religion and customary morals. Our life is lacking in morals, in a traditional, sacred, unwritten understanding about what is proper and becoming between people.⁵

Such statements fall closely in line with Le Fort’s own reflections on the era. In a series of postwar lectures, Le Fort averred, “The special experience of modern man is a profound horror of the threat that all that is good, all that has seemed our safe possession for centuries will be ruined.”⁶ As a devout Christian and recent convert to Catholicism, Le Fort felt the decline of religious faith and morality particularly. Like several other German Catholic intellectuals of her time, Le Fort saw a wealth of irreligious, even immoral threats in modern society, and, in response, she joined with her contemporaries to champion a resurgence of Christian faith and values. Such efforts, Helena Tomko indicated, were also in part a direct response to the Catholic Church’s statements against the emerging cultural and political trends that the Church perceived as “atheistic threats to the modern world.”⁷ In a pair of encyclicals from 1931, Pope Pius XI

⁵ Hermann Hesse, “Die Sehnsucht unserer Zeit nach einer Weltanschauung,” *Uhu* 2 (1926): 3–14; reprinted in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 365.

⁶ Gertrud von Le Fort, unpublished lectures, quoted in La Chevallerie, “Gertrud von Le Fort and the Fear of Blanche de La Force,” 11–12.

⁷ Tomko, *Sacramental Realism*, 87.

spoke out against communism, fascism, and the ardent politics of the right-wing Action Française and cautioned Catholics against quietism in the face of economic and political instability.⁸ As Tomko summarizes, “Catholics were instructed to view a socialist and materialist understanding of reality, society, and the human person, represented vividly in the violence of Russian communism, as the most tangible evil of the age,” with dire political, and, more importantly, spiritual and moral implications.⁹

In *Die Letzte am Schafott*, Le Fort allegorically echoed the Church’s statements against communism. The novella, however, was more than just politically motivated. The fears that she reflected in Blanche de la Force’s character were a complex amalgamation of political, religious, and personal concerns. Through her depiction of Blanche’s journey and ultimate redemption through a mystical endowment of grace, Le Fort metaphorically offered a model for social, cultural, religious, and personal regeneration. In a 1934 letter to Martin Rade, editor of the cultural-Protestant journal *Die christliche Welt*, Le Fort affirmed,

Die Letzte am Schafott is, as one can easily see, not only an historical work—it was formed in the years when we were slowly becoming aware of a profound threat to our Christian acquisitions arising not only from Russian godlessness, but also from the godlessness in our own country.¹⁰

The novella’s historical setting was, as Le Fort called it, “only a garment for clothing a rather acute problem.”¹¹ Her intention was not so much to memorialize the Carmelites’ sacrifice as to present through Blanche’s story a message of love, Christian sacrifice, and the power of divine

⁸ See *Non abbiamo bisogno* (1931) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) in *Selected Encyclicals, 1928–32* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1932), [no page]. Tomko, *Sacramental Realism*, 87.

⁹ Tomko, *Sacramental Realism*, 88.

¹⁰ “*Die Letzte am Schafott* ist, wie Sie leicht sehen werden, nicht nur eine historische Dichtung—sie entstand bei mir in den Jahren, da man sich langsam bewusst wurde, dass von der russischen wie auch von der einheimischen Gottlosigkeit her sich eine tiefe Bedrohung der christlichen Glaubensgüter vorbereitete.” Gertrud von Le Fort to Martin Rade, 27 May 1934, quoted in Tomko, *Sacramental Realism*, 156.

¹¹ Gertrud von Le Fort, unpublished lectures, quoted in La Chevallerie, “Gertrud von Le Fort and the Fear of Blanche de La Force,” 13.

grace, which she felt were the only weapons against the evils of the modern world. After the end of the Second World War, Le Fort remarked,

Revolutions mark the end of any régime: both the powerful and the powerless become afraid and this general fear results in brutal acts. The evil, the demonic powers cannot be overcome by political actions or anything whatsoever save by Christian love and Christian sacrifice acting at a profounder level.¹²

Hence, *Die Letzte am Schafott*, with its modernized and symbolic treatment of the French Revolution, perceptive representations of fear, and assertions of the supremacy of divine intervention, represents one of Le Fort's most poignant, dramatic, and particularly spiritual responses to the political turmoil and personal angst of her era.

Georges Bernanos's Political Tirade

In contrast to Le Fort's primarily political treatment of the Carmelites' story, Georges Bernanos adopted an essentially spiritual perspective for his adaptation of Le Fort's novella. His dialogues focus on Blanche's interior spiritual conflict, which in some respects echoes Bernanos's personal struggles with faith and fear of death. As a young child, Bernanos acquired intense fears of divine abandonment and death, which he later recalled in his stinging political pamphlet *Les Grandes cimetières sous la lune* (literally *The Great Cemeteries Under the Moon*, translated as *A Diary of My Times*; 1938):

Who first taught me that Faith is a gift of God? I do not know. My mother, no doubt. But then I realized that it was a gift that could be withdrawn . . . From this moment I knew the anguish of death, for after so many years I cannot separate the one anguish from the other. This double terror entered by the same breach in my young heart.¹³

¹² Gertrud von Le Fort, lectures given in Switzerland and Germany, 1948–1949, quoted in La Chevallierie, "Gertrud von Le Fort and the Fear of Blanche de La Force," 15–16.

¹³ Georges Bernanos, *Les grands cimetières sous la lune* (Paris: Plon, 1938), quoted in Frank Field, *Three French Writers and the Great War: Studies in the Rise of Communism and Fascism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 145.

Bernanos's personal conflict with fear reached its apex during World War I while he served as a volunteer in the Sixth Regiment of Dragoons. As cultural historian Frank Field indicated, as the war persisted, Bernanos developed an increasingly bleak projection for the future of mankind. His childhood fears returned as he once again was "overwhelmed by a sense that the world had been abandoned by God."¹⁴ In 1917, Bernanos recorded his feelings of despair in a letter to his friend Dom Besse, a Benedictine monk from Ligugé and the chaplain of the Action Française:

There is a thicket with a rustic look about it where we have left a hundred and forty horses. I have buried mine in a shellhole. Animals and men sleep together under several spadefuls of earth, and the living inhale the mud. Ah! It is not only one's sense of reason and one's feelings of sentiment that suffer violence here! The earth is not so much turned over as irreparably defiled. The demon in mankind must triumph in this monstrous, this sickening satiety, a satiety that seems to make the Devil as powerful as God.¹⁵

Bernanos, emotionally overwhelmed by the terrible violence of World War I and the growing callousness that he saw among his fellow soldiers, came to interpret the horrors of war as an attack on Christian faith, and this conception of war intensified in the decades leading up to *Dialogues des Carmélites* as he witnessed the ferocity of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and, only shortly thereafter, the outbreak of World War II. In a series of polemical essays from the 1940s, Bernanos was ruthlessly open in his condemnation of the dehumanizing and totalitarian tendencies implicit in modern civilization.¹⁶ "I have watched this society in action," Bernanos wrote, "I have counted its mass graves, its prisons, its torture camps, its laboratories of death, and I know perfectly well that, if there have been societies more savage than this one in the past, there has never been one so willingly and knowingly savage."¹⁷

¹⁴ Field, *Three French Writers and the Great War*, 151.

¹⁵ Béguin, *Bernanos par lui-même*, 106, quoted in Field, *Three French Writers and the Great War*, 151–152.

¹⁶ Field, *Three French Writers and the Great War*, 181.

¹⁷ Georges Bernanos, *Le Lendemain c'est vous!* (Paris: Plon, 1969), 244–245, quoted in Michael R. Tobin, *Georges Bernanos: The Theological Source of His Art* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 183–184.

The atrocities that Bernanos witnessed in Majorca during the Spanish Civil War had a particular effect on him and, as Pierrette Renard has suggested, likely influenced his portrayal of revolutionary terror in *Dialogues des Carmélites*.¹⁸ In Majorca, Bernanos saw the ferocity of the civil war slowly make its way into his small community and watched in horror as the principles of the original Spanish Fascists were perverted to support the brutality. He saw within the violence a culmination of the moral degradation of man, not only on the part of the aggressors who committed the atrocities, but also in the citizens and clergymen who accepted the brutal injustice first in disbelief, and then in silence and even acceptance:

Spain is living under the reign of death, and the abstract symbol of mortality is no longer enough. Death roams around the vast cemeteries like a famished lioness, digging up the corpses, crouching on top of them, haunted by the secret which it is trying to make them reveal. Spain is living in one of these moments today. Oh yes, the thing began very simply with a military *coup d'état*. I lived through those weeks of waiting, and I know what I am talking about. For a Frenchman like myself the atmosphere was already intolerable. But the people over here paid no attention to it. "It will be over in a day or two," they said. The less optimistic gave it a week. And now months have passed, and Spain is filling its lungs with a mist of blood.¹⁹

Bernanos's gruesome experience of the Spanish Civil War may very well have influenced his portrayal of the revolutionary violence in *Dialogues des Carmélites*. Particularly, Bernanos's remarks about the onset of the war recall the Marquis de la Force's comments at the opening of *Dialogues des Carmélites*. The Marquis, like the Spanish citizens, believed that the revolutionary violence would prove to be only transitory: "It will all pass."

The Spanish Civil War proved to be more destructive than anyone had foreseen. Even Bernanos, who in 1936 had given enthusiastic support to the Spanish generals' rebellion against the republican government, retracted his support and by 1937 had become a bitter opponent of

¹⁸ Pierrette Renard, "Bernanos et la terreur dans l'histoire de la modernité," in *Terreur et Représentation*, ed. Pierre Glaudes (Grenoble: Université Stendhal, 1996), 109–118.

¹⁹ Georges Bernanos, *Bulletin* 28–29, 16–17, quoted in Speaight, *Georges Bernanos*, 162–163.

Francisco Franco's militarism. In 1938, Bernanos compiled his thoughts about the war in the pamphlet *Les grands cimetières sous la lune*, wherein he presented the terrors of the war as support for his polemical attack against tyranny and totalitarianism.²⁰ Bernanos's descriptions of the violence in Spain present a world akin to revolutionary France, marked by injudicious condemnation, executions without trial, and a general devaluation of human life. The carts of the eighteenth century may have been replaced by twentieth-century trucks, the guillotine exchanged for a pistol, but the principle remained the same. As Bernanos insisted,

All reigns of Terror are alike, all are of the same origin; you will not get me to distinguish between them. I have seen too much, I know men too well, and I am too old now. Fear disgusts me in everybody, and behind all the fine talk of those butchers, lies fear, and only fear. Massacres are due to fear, hate is but an alibi.²¹

With the onset of World War II, Bernanos's tirade against the horrors of war only intensified. In his last completed volume of essays, *La France contre les robots* (*France Against the Robots*, 1944), he criticized the modern man for embracing the technological advances and pervasive attitude of acceptance that, according to Bernanos, have reduced the average man to an "imbécile," an irresponsible, obedient servant of the collective will.

Idiots! Are you not the sons and grandsons of those other idiots who, in my youth, got all choked up over the nobility of commercial competition and Industry's benign clashes of interest at that enormous Bazaar they called the World's Fair of 1900? . . . What is the use, since the experience of 1914 seems to have had no effect on you? The experience of 1940 won't do you much more good . . . Thirty, sixty, a hundred million dead will never distract you from your obsession: "Go faster, whatever it takes." . . . Oh! In the next inevitable war the flame-throwing tanks will be able to spit out their streams for two thousand meters instead of fifty, your sons' faces will melt in seconds and their eyes will burst from their sockets, dogs that you are.²²

²⁰ Georges Bernanos, *A Diary of My Times*, trans. Pamela Morris (London: Boriswood, 1938), 13.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

²² Georges Bernanos, "La France contre les robots," in *Essais et écrits de combat*, ed. Michel Estève, 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 1024–1025. English translation by Michael Tobin. Tobin, *Georges Bernanos*, 173–174.

In addition, like Le Fort, Bernanos was struck by the decline of Christian morals in contemporary civilization. He interpreted World War II as an assault against Christianity, the underlying goal being to reduce Christian faith to an abstraction.²³ The real horror of war, he insisted, was not the physical destruction and extensive loss of human life inherent to modern warfare, but rather the rupture of the Christian world. In a letter to his friend Jorge de Lima, Bernanos maintained that the devastation of conscience was “more deplorable than the devastation of bodies.”²⁴ Tragically, such moral devastation, Bernanos insisted, had already begun. In his final essays, Bernanos contended that already, Europe had been “de-Christianized,” even to the point of “spiritual anemia,” and the most tragic symptom of this condition, Bernanos explained, was a general “indifference to both truth and falsehood.”²⁵ Amidst the profusion of propaganda that characterized contemporary society, people more or less passively accepted whatever was suggested, willingly forsaking in weariness any responsibility for personal judgment. Man has lost his freedom to think individually, Bernanos lamented, and the loss is more poignant because he has allowed it to happen. He viewed the rise of totalitarian governments as less a cause than a symptom of the accelerating decay of freedom, and which, like a “giant fungus,” would only grow stronger as it gorged itself upon “the putrid juices of decomposing freedoms.”²⁶ Such conditions, Bernanos feared, made mankind ripe for any kind of tyranny:

Tyranny is not behind us, but in front of us; we must look it in the face, now or never. All humanity is sick. It is humanity which must be cured. First and above all, man must be respiritualized.²⁷

²³ Tobin, *Georges Bernanos*, 165.

²⁴ Georges Bernanos to Jorge de Lima, January 1941. Georges Bernanos, *Combat pour la liberté*, vol. 2 of *Correspondance inédite*, ed. Albert Béguin (Paris: Plon, 1971), 375, quoted in Tobin, *Georges Bernanos*, 165.

²⁵ Georges Bernanos, *The Last Essays of Georges Bernanos*, trans. Joan Ulanov and Barry Ulanov (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1955), 116.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

In *Dialogues des Carmélites*, Bernanos metaphorically proposed a solution for the problems of modernity. On the individual level, Bernanos humanized the character of Blanche in an embodiment of the complex realm of emotions that characterized the modern man—fear, uncertainty, disgrace, a yearning for lost honor—and placed her within the encompassing terror of the Revolution, which acted as an apt stand-in for the perils of the modern world. Through Bernanos’s emphasis on Blanche’s transformation, the drama ultimately becomes not a story of the young postulant’s fear during the Terror, but rather an account of her redemption through grace despite her fear in a sort of ineffable spiritual liberation. Although Blanche suffered agonizing fear, despair, humiliation, and ultimately self-hatred, she found, through her communion with her fellow saints, sufficient strength to rise above her self-destruction and, with her sisters, offer her life in consecration to preserve their Christian faith and their country. A similar depth of faith and spiritual unity, Bernanos insisted, was desperately needed to save the modern man:

The faith that some of you complain you don’t know is to be found deep inside men; it fills their interior life. It is that interior life by which all men, rich or poor, ignorant or wise, may make contact with the divine, that is, with universal Love, of which all Creation is simply the inexhaustible outburst. It is against that interior life that our inhuman civilization is conspiring, with its delirious activity, its frenzied need of distraction and that abominable dissipation of degenerated spiritual energies which is melting away the life-substance of humanity.²⁸

In Bernanos’s interpretation, World War II was made possible largely through the de-Christianization of Europe.²⁹ “A society,” he wrote, “that has kept nothing of Christianity except its vocabulary and certain moral habits, and is incapable of resolving its own contradictions, is ripe for any order and any master.”³⁰ In other words, an increasing feeling of ambivalence and a

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 242.

²⁹ Tobin, *Georges Bernanos*, 161.

³⁰ Georges Bernanos, *Lettres retrouvées, 1904-1948*, vol. 3 of Correspondance inédite, ed. Jean-Loup Bernanos (Paris: Plon, 1971), 435, quoted in Tobin, *Georges Bernanos*, 162.

lack of firm Christian convictions made totalitarianism possible. Bernanos came to believe that Christianity needed a renewal of faith and charity to end the spiritual decline of humanity; to restore itself from social, religious, and political degeneration; and fight off the growing evils of the emergent totalitarian regimes.

Moreover, according to Bernanos, France itself needed a similar renewal. He identified the fall of Charles Maurras, leader of the Action Française and Bernanos's childhood idol, as symbolic of France's moral collapse. Maurras, whom Bernanos had once believed might be the savior of France, now seemed to be not so much concerned with restoring the monarchy as with defending his own bourgeois interests and securing political rank and authority among the Establishment.³¹ In 1938, fearing the threats of socialism and anarchy, Maurras led the Action Française in supporting the appeasement of Hitler, a resignation that, to Bernanos, represented a betrayal of France's honor.³² For Bernanos, honor was absolute, and in promulgating France's "supernatural vocation," he believed that his country must uphold its honor, no matter what the risk.³³ Maurras, on the other hand, could pragmatically accept a dishonored homeland as long as its political integrity and financial stability remained intact.³⁴ This was too much for Bernanos, and he left his beloved France not long after, railing polemics against what he saw as a scandal against truth:

To those who ask why I have left my own country for Brazil, I can say that I came here to cover my shame. Some people are overcome by shame; others it reduces to despair; and I am one of them. I want to go on writing, and to witness on behalf of what I love. And I know very well that shame and disgust would have reduced me to impotence, or to the hatred which is impotence in its pure and demonical form. . . . From this distance, among the sincere friends of my country, the *diktat* of Munich appears to me in its true colors—a macabre farce, but still a farce, one

³¹ Field, *Three French Writers and the Great War*, 177–178.

³² Tobin, *Georges Bernanos*, 37–39.

³³ Bernanos, *Combat pour la liberté*, 416, quoted in Tobin, *Georges Bernanos*, 39.

³⁴ Tobin, *Georges Bernanos*, 39.

of those events that can have no root in our history—a kind of miscarriage, where France was raped in her sleep by blackguards in the corner of a wood.³⁵

The sudden and profound shock of France's fall to Germany in 1940 left Bernanos mourning for his country and concerned for its future. He viewed Marshal Pétain's government at Vichy as a continuation of the same self-interest that had corrupted Maurras and strongly believed that the Vichy government and its supporters were of the same stock that had followed Maurras and who were now content to live under a Nazi protectorate "providing it guarantees the security of themselves and their possessions."³⁶ Humiliated and debased, France had lost its honor.

Only a few months before he began work on *Dialogues des Carmélites*, Bernanos wrote, "The love of country, like the love of God, is founded upon the voluntary gift of self."³⁷ The redemption of France's honor required sacrifice, Bernanos argued, and notably, he feared, this spirit of sacrifice was missing from contemporary France:

Everyone knows, along with Marshal Pétain, that the generation of the last war lacked a spirit of sacrifice. Allow me to conclude from this that certain ecclesiastical circles, misled by the new methods of propaganda that were increasing the number of converts daily, sometimes sacrificed quality to quantity, mistook publicity for preaching, and membership for conversion. What kind of Christianity is it that does not teach us how to suffer and how to die?³⁸

Bernanos was not without hope, however. The future for France, he believed, lay with Charles de Gaulle and the French Resistance. As Thomas Molnar summarized, Bernanos believed that the Resistance "would become the nucleus of rebirth, having passed the test of patriotism, and having pledged martyrs in such a number that their accumulated moral capital

³⁵ Georges Bernanos, *Scandale de la Vérité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1939), 73–74, quoted in Speaight, *Georges Bernanos*, 185.

³⁶ Bernanos, *Lettres retrouvées*, 257, quoted in Tobin, *Georges Bernanos*, 48.

³⁷ Bernanos, *Lettres retrouvées*, 1275, quoted in Tobin, *Georges Bernanos*, 199.

³⁸ Bernanos, *Lettres retrouvées*, 267–268, quoted in Tobin, *Georges Bernanos*, 52–53.

would serve as a foundation for a new France.”³⁹ Thus, France could restore its lost honor by repudiating the Vichy government and embracing de Gaulle, thereby expunging the memory of its defeat in 1940 and paving the way for a post-war renaissance through the sacrifice and martyrdom of the Resistance forces. The key to Bernanos’s philosophy, Molnar explained, was the Catholic idea of the Communion of the Saints, which the author liberally extended beyond the Church to apply it just as equally to secular communities as to religious groups. Bernanos believed that the people of France, like the Carmelites of the Revolution, were connected in a mystical communion in which their country’s martyrs could lend their intense faith and sacrifice to benefit the nation as a whole. With Europe on the verge of de-Christianization, he considered the sacrifices of the Resistance forces as “precious elements” vitally linked to France’s identity and honor. As Bernanos theorized,

The existence of a nation, as the existence of an individual, is linked to the presence in its vital sphere of certain very precious elements. Their gradual disappearance may, at first, go unnoticed, until the day when the proportion drops under the minimum threshold and the patient collapses, as if struck by lightning.⁴⁰

Ultimately, despite the courage of the Resistance and its supporters, France owed its liberation more to the efforts of others than to the heroism of its own citizens, and the revolution that Bernanos had hoped for vanished in a relapse of the political and social immobilism that had characterized the Third Republic.⁴¹ Recounting a discussion with Bernanos shortly after the liberation, André Rousseaux recalled,

[Bernanos] questioned me about the France that he was to see once more in a few days’ time, and he awaited the meeting with infinite tenderness and immense anxiety. I told him all that we had experienced, over the last nine months, of stupefaction and disappointment. . . . It was understood that this revolution, this rebirth of France, burnt us to the soul, like a fire that nothing should extinguish.

³⁹ Thomas Steven Molnar, *Bernanos: His Political Thought and Prophecy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1997), 142.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Molnar, *Bernanos*, 142.

⁴¹ Field, *Three French Writers and the Great War*, 180; Speaight, *Georges Bernanos*, 244–245.

As for the moral collapse in which its flame ran the risk of wavering, here what I said described only very vaguely a confusion that I still did not perceive clearly for myself. . . .

“I was afraid of it,” he murmured. “I was afraid of it.” He spoke these words in an undertone, as if he were weighed down by a fearful weariness. . . . He already had a deep perception of what only a very few Frenchmen felt as an obscure uneasiness. No doubt we could already have realized that what Paris had prepared, for more than six months before the 25th of August 1944, was not so much its liberation—which was a farce—but the replacement of those in occupation by the occupation of those who had arrived. We should have had the courage to admit that from that moment the moral bankruptcy of the Resistance had marked the lowest point of resignation to which France had descended. We shut our eyes to a truth which would have broken our hopes of a marvelous resurrection, like a body broken on a wheel. Bernanos, I now realize, kept his eyes open as he waited for the atrocious truth to become clear to him. That is what I gathered from the distant look in his eyes, as he murmured in a low voice: “I was afraid of it.”⁴²

Although the disappointment of the forestalled revolution weighed heavily upon Bernanos, he continued to explore the themes of reconciliation and hope on both spiritual and political levels in his late writings. This is evidenced particularly in *Dialogues des Carmélites*, which many scholars, including Frank Field, Robert Speaight, and Michael Tobin, have interpreted as symbolic of postwar France.⁴³ Blanche de la Force, tormented by uncontrollable fear and an acute sense of dishonor, may quite legitimately be read as representing the demoralized and humiliated France of the 1940s. In this political allegory, Blanche’s honor, and likewise that of France, is revealed as being in the care of God, and just as Blanche could regain her honor only through sacrifice and by submitting herself to His will, so too can France reclaim its former glory only through similar self-sacrifice and a return to Christian virtues. Thus, Blanche’s redemption at the end of the dialogues seems to issue a profound hope that all those

⁴² André Rousseaux, *Démision de la France: Cahiers du Rhône*, 321–322, quoted in Speaight, *Georges Bernanos*, 244–245.

⁴³ Field, *Three French Writers and the Great War*, 192–193; Speaight, *Georges Bernanos*, 297–268; Tobin, *Georges Bernanos*, 198–199.

who had given their lives fighting for France during the war might not have died in vain. France could yet be redeemed.

Francis Poulenc's Spiritual Testament

As evidenced, Bernanos's dialogues, like Le Fort's novella, have prompted scholars to make political connections between his dramatic depiction of the Carmelites' story and the plight of postwar Europe. Poulenc's opera, on the other hand, has drawn negligible political commentary, with some critics, including Shirley Apthorp and Donal Henahan, even blatantly arguing against any political interpretation of the opera.⁴⁴ Scholars and critics have concentrated instead on the spiritual aspect of the work, relegating any ancillary political implications in the story to Le Fort's novella or Bernanos's original dialogues and infusing Poulenc's operatic interpretation with deep spiritual and personal meanings. Claude Gendre, for example, has critically expounded upon the intense personal and romantic crises Poulenc endured during the composition of the opera, suggesting that, as the composer himself insisted, Poulenc's emotional torment during these years of trials contributed a unique spiritual significance to the opera.⁴⁵ Mark Bosco went one step further to link directly Poulenc's work on *Dialogues* with a deepening sense of spirituality as evidenced in the composer's correspondence while writing the opera.⁴⁶ Several other scholars, including M. Owen Lee, Donald Spoto, and Leopold Tonneau, have capitalized on Poulenc's self-expressed emphasis on grace and the idea of the transfer of grace to

⁴⁴ Shirley Apthorp, "A Convert to Poulenc's Vision," *Financial Times*, 7 February 2003; Donal Henahan, "Is Opera Incompatible with Serious Argument?" *New York Times*, 2 November 1986. See also Denis Waleckx, "In Search of a Libretto," in *Francis Poulenc: Music, Art and Literature*, ed. Sidney Buckland and Myriam Chimènes (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1999), 267.

⁴⁵ Gendre, "Dialogues des Carmélites: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera"; Gendre, "Dialogues des Carmélites: Rencontre spirituelle entre Bernanos et Poulenc"; Gendre, "The Literary Destiny of the Sixteen Carmelite Martyrs of Compiègne and the Role of Emmet Lavery."

⁴⁶ Bosco, "Georges Bernanos and Francis Poulenc: Catholic Convergences in *Dialogues of the Carmelites*," 33.

argue for an almost exclusively religious interpretation of the opera.⁴⁷ Political connections with the opera, if they are even identified, are typically relegated to the background and dismissed as only a part of the story's revolutionary context and thereby entirely removed from contemporary reality.⁴⁸ Moreover, the few attempts to bring politics to the forefront through nontraditional staging (such as dressing the revolutionary crowd in costumes from 1940s France) have been almost entirely lost on critics.⁴⁹

Instead, directors have favored restraint and austerity in their staging in order to emphasize the religious, even mystical effect of the nuns' sacrifice and almost force the audience into contemplative meditation.⁵⁰ Of particular interest are the two recent DVD productions of the opera—Marthe Keller's 1999 production with the Opéra National du Rhin and Robert Carsen's 2004 production at the Teatro alla Scala—which have both, in their own ways, heightened the sense of mystical experience in the opera's final scene.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Lee, *A Season of Opera*, 170–181; Donald Spoto, "Dialogue on *Carmélites* II: A Roman Catholic's Perspective," *Opera News* 67, no. 7 (2003): 25–27; Leopold Fernand Charles Tonneau, "De *Tirésias* aux *Carmélites*, ou, Le transfert de la grâce: Essai sur le cheminement spirituel de Francis Poulenc tel que je l'ai perçu dans son œuvre musicale" (PhD diss., Faculté Université de Théologie Protestante, Bruxelles, 2000), 336–426.

⁴⁸ Holmberg, "Confrontation with the Self"; Kestner, "The Scaffold of Honor."

⁴⁹ George Walker, review of *Dialogues des Carmélites*, by Francis Poulenc, directed by Tazewell Thompson, conducted by Randall Behr, Indiana University opera (26 February 2005), Indiana Public Media, <http://indianapublicmedia.org/arts/les-dialogues-des-carmelites/> (accessed 7 April 2010); see also Markland Taylor, review of *Dialogues des Carmélites*, by Francis Poulenc, directed by Tazewell Thompson, conducted by Stewart Robertson, New York City Opera (27 July 2002), *Variety*, 5–11 August, 2002; Jay Nordlinger, "Unbearably Good," *New York Sun*, 14 October 2004, <http://www.nysun.com/arts/unbearably-good/3231/> (accessed 7 April 2010).

⁵⁰ See, for example, Mark Mandel, review of *Dialogues des Carmélites*, by Francis Poulenc, directed by David Edwards, conducted by Marc Trautmann, Portland Opera (24 March 2001), *Opera News* (2001): 64–65; John von Rhein, review of *Dialogues des Carmélites*, by Francis Poulenc, directed by Didier Kersten, conducted by Andrew Davis, Lyric Opera of Chicago (17 February 2007), *American Record Guide* (May/June 2007): 36–37. See also Hans A. Alma and T. Hetty Zock, "The Impact of a Religious Opera on Secular Audience: The Existential and Religious Importance of Art," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 8 (June 2005): 127–140.

⁵¹ Francis Poulenc, *Dialogues des Carmélites*, DVD, directed by Marthe Keller, Orchestre philharmonique de Strasbourg, Jan Latham-Koenig, conductor, with Anne-Sophie Schmidt, Hedwig Fassbender, Patricia Petibon, Didier Henry, Laurence Dale, Nadine Denize, Valerie Millot, and the chorus of the Opéra national du Rhin (Munich, Germany: Arthaus Musik, 1999); Francis Poulenc, *Dialogues des Carmélites*, DVD, directed by Robert Carsen, Orchestra and Chorus of the Teatro alla Scala, Ricardo Muti, conductor, with Dagmar Schellenberger, Anja Silja, Barbara Denver, Laura Aikin, Gwynne Geyer, Christopher Robertson, Gordon Gietz, and Mario Bolognesi (Ratigen, Germany: TDK, 2004).

Both Keller and Carsen favored sparse sets and costumes for their respective productions, presumably wishing to evoke a sense of religious simplicity unfettered by dramatic spectacle. For the final scene, both directors opted against revolutionary scenery. There is no guillotine, no scaffold, no soldiers, nor revolutionary crowds. Instead, the Carmelites in both productions appear on an otherwise empty stage, dressed in similar long white gowns. Standing resolutely, they begin their hymn, accompanied by a wordless chorus that remains unseen in both productions. The decision to place the chorus offstage creates an eerie, supernatural effect since the Carmelites appear to be supported vocally by an unknown and perhaps divine source.⁵² With each ominous thump of the guillotine, one of the Carmelites falls silently to the stage until only Constance remains, then Blanche, and finally we are left with only the lingering echoes of the chorus. In both productions, this staging disconnects Blanche and her sisters from the external conflict of the Revolution. Through the minimalist staging, the Carmelites are separated from their external reality, and the final scene is transformed from a final political statement about persecution and fear into a symbol of the Carmelites' willingness to die for their faith.

Considering the deep political connections in Le Fort's original novella and Bernanos's dramatic adaptation of her story, this disinclination for political interpretations of the opera may seem somewhat surprising. One may wonder, what is different about Poulenc's opera that it defies political commentary? Did Poulenc, in condensing Bernanos's dialogues and adapting them for the operatic stage, effectively purge the drama of its political material?

In part, yes. Poulenc's critical reduction of Bernanos's text for the libretto did expunge many of the most overt political connections originally found in Bernanos's dialogues. As

⁵² Speaking of the disembodied voice, Carolyn Abbate has indicated that, "a voice originating from an unseen locus of energy and thought . . . has distinct powers, especially as represented in opera and film. . . . Such voices are considered divine, or at least supernatural, free of ordinary encumbrances." Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 6.

discussed in chapter two, Poulenc omitted or shortened almost two-thirds of the revolutionary scenes from the dialogues, thereby reducing significantly the dramatic interaction between the cloistered Carmelites and their political oppressors (see Appendix). In the original dialogues, Bernanos presented a fairly comprehensive chronology of the revolutionary actions against the Carmelites' religious community, which he had adapted from the historically-based events depicted in Le Fort's novella. His dialogues included scenes depicting the inventory taken by delegates from the municipality (Tableau III, scene v), the inspection of the convent and interrogation of the nuns by the District Commission (Tableau III, scenes x and xi), the Prioress's receipt of the decree prohibiting the taking of new religious vows (Tableau III, scene xvi, and Tableau IV, scene i), the vandalization of the sacristy (Tableau IV, scene iii), and the official expulsion of the Carmelites by Municipal officers (Tableau V, scene v). Furthermore, Bernanos included a series of four scenes following Blanche's flight from the convent that portray her discovery of her father's arrest upon her return to her family home and her subsequent appearance before the revolutionary tribunal in order to secure the Marquis's liberation (Tableau V, scenes i–iv). Taken together, these scenes reveal the depth of the revolutionary conflict and illustrate acutely the dire position of Blanche, who, as both a nun and a member of the aristocracy, faces a dual persecution at the hands of the revolutionary forces.

In Poulenc's opera, however, many of these scenes were removed, and, moreover, due to a few seemingly minor changes in Bernanos's text, two of the revolutionary scenes that were not eliminated from the opera (i.e., Act II, scene 4, and Act III, scene 4) lost a portion of their political significance. Because of the earlier omitted scenes in the opera, revolutionaries do not appear onstage until Act II, scene 4, when a revolutionary mob accompanies four members of the District Commission into the convent in order to witness the Second Commissary read the

National Assembly's decree of expulsion. In Bernanos's dialogues, the stage directions for the scene intimate a violent infiltration of the convent. The nuns watch in terror as the door to the convent is broken in and two or three revolutionaries climb through the breach, forcing entry into the once cloistered chapel. Constance, whom Mother Marie had silently instructed to unlock the door, appears frozen with terror, compelling Mother Marie to intervene. Demonstrating a characteristic imperviousness and poise, she calmly takes the key back from Constance's hand and turns it over to one of the intruders in order to admit the Commissaries—and the accompanying mob—into the convent. Although the Commissaries' official business with Mother Marie is brief, they leave a group of proletariats to patrol the convent overnight. The next scene in Bernanos's dialogues is a silent witness to the destructive power of the mob.

The screen now shows the sacked convent, though its invaders have gone. The last artisan to leave pauses for a moment on the threshold to take a final swig at his bottle, then throws it at the wall. A kind of door has been made by binding the broken planks together with wire.⁵³

In his opera, Poulenc preserved the atmosphere of panic that accompanies the revolutionaries' forced entry into the convent. Although the revolutionary forces do not physically break into the chapel in the opera, Poulenc marks their imposing threat musically with a sudden and dramatic change of mood. When the nuns' anxious contemplation of their tenuous political situation is suddenly interrupted by the convent's doorbell, the orchestra departs from the "extremely calm" lyricism that had accompanied the scene's opening and begins a jarring, syncopated alternation between muted brass and staccato strings that echoes the Carmelites' mounting terror (Act II, scene 4, cue 74). The cries of the revolutionary chorus to open the convent door grow in volume as the Carmelites fearfully interject their resolution to resist the revolutionaries' demands (Act II, scene 4, cue 77). Once the Commissaries and the

⁵³ Bernanos, "Dialogues des Carmélites," 125.

accompanying mob are admitted into the convent—again thanks to Mother Marie’s intervention, although here Constance’s hesitation to open the door lasts for only a moment—the scene progresses much as in Bernanos’s original text (Act II, scene 4, cue 78).

Although Poulenc preserved this episode to demonstrate musically and dramatically the conflict between the Carmelites and their revolutionary oppressors, the effect of the scene is more psychological than political, as demonstrated particularly by the two recent DVD productions of the opera. In both productions, the primary foci throughout the beginning of the scene are the Carmelites and their mounting fear. When, at the end of Act II, the revolutionaries interrupt what has up to that moment been Blanche’s story—the story of an aristocrat and a nun, but more so the story of Blanche the individual—they are seen not as an imposing *political* force, but rather as a symbol of general oppression. Their values, desires, and politics are removed, and they become merely the cause of the Carmelites’ fear and their ultimate martyrdom. In both DVD productions, during the interplay between the frightened nuns and the revolutionary mob, the Carmelites run around the stage in near hysteria while the revolutionaries remain unseen. Their presence is made known only through their forceful interjections to “Open the door.” Once the revolutionaries gain admittance into the convent, their musical and dramatic presence is significantly diminished. While on stage, only two of the revolutionaries have singing roles—the First and Second Commissioners—a point that Marthe Keller emphasized in her production by having only those two individuals move forward to center stage while the rest of the revolutionaries remain in the background, where they are almost completely obscured by the darkness. In Robert Carsen’s production, on the other hand, the entire revolutionary mob does enter the convent. Even still, their presence is reduced to that of a general, imposing threat. As

the Carmelites huddle together in fear, the mob looms around them in the darkness, representing visually the imposing feelings of fear that have haunted Blanche all along.

Then, to conclude the scene, Poulenc departs dramatically from Bernanos's text. Instead of pausing briefly to solemnly contemplate the desecrated convent or, to continue following the chronology of Bernanos's dialogues, skipping ahead to the vow of martyrdom, Poulenc transports a scene from earlier in the original drama—the destruction of the statue of *le Petit Roi* (Act II, scene 4, cue 85). In Bernanos's dialogues, this brief episode had followed a series of scenes that Poulenc cut for his libretto (see Appendix), including the Carmelites' notification of and reaction to the revolutionary decree that prohibited the taking of new religious vows (Tableau III, scene xvi, and Tableau IV, scenes i and ii) and the vandalization and pillaging of the convent by the revolutionary crowd (Tableau IV, scene iii). Thus, in Bernanos's text, the breaking of the statue of *le Petit Roi* becomes a dramatic climax to this first episode of revolutionary violence against the Carmelites. In particular, the scene reveals Blanche's profound sensitivity to the revolutionaries' persecution and marks the beginning of her gradual loss of faith in her ability to overcome her fears. Likely, Poulenc wanted to preserve the dramatic effect of the scene's original placement in Bernanos's dialogues and accordingly repositioned the scene in his opera to occur after the first and only violent infiltration of the Carmelites' convent (Act II, scene iv). By using this particular episode to conclude the scene, Poulenc brings Blanche's internal conflict to the forefront, and the audience is left contemplating not the political conflict and turmoil of the Revolution, but rather the depth and intimacy of Blanche's psychological struggle against her own fears and religious doubt, for that, in Poulenc's interpretation, was the real subject of the opera. As Poulenc explained in an interview with Daniel Bernet,

Blanche is the real subject. This young girl is sick and insane. And Jacquemont's stage direction [in the Paris production] makes it evident that we are dealing with insanity as well as fear. Then there is Constance, who loves Blanche innocently and instinctively. Grace operates through her, and the true subject of the play is the transferal of grace and the communion of saints.⁵⁴

Even more dramatic are the changes that Poulenc made to the final scene of the opera, which once again place Blanche's internal conflict at the forefront of the drama and relegate the external conflict of the Revolution to a secondary position. In fact, there appears to be a progressive reduction of the depth of the external conflict between Blanche and the revolutionaries in each adaptation of the story. In Le Fort's original text, Blanche's martyrdom at the Carmelites' execution was not a conscious decision on her part, but rather a direct result of the political tension of the Revolution. At the end of the novella, when, to the complete astonishment of the revolutionary crowd, Blanche joins her voice with those of her sisters in order to end their *Veni Creator*, the mob reacts violently, silencing Blanche's voice with a crush of murderous blows. In Bernanos's version, Blanche's death is somewhat less gruesome, but her martyrdom is still thrust upon her. Just moments after she raises her voice to conclude the *Veni Creator*, a group of women suddenly surround Blanche and push her towards the scaffold. Compared to Le Fort's riotous mob, these women are somewhat separated from their persecution of Blanche. Although their hatred of Blanche and her religious ideals prompts them to murder, ultimately Blanche's blood is spilt on their revolutionary machine and not at their own brutal hands. Despite their differences, however, both Le Fort's and Bernanos's versions of this final scene reemphasize the political conflict between the Carmelites and the revolutionaries, making Blanche's death further evidence of the underlying political conflict.

⁵⁴ Francis Poulenc, interview with Daniel Bernet, Fonds Montpensier, Bibliothèque nationale; quoted in Daniel, *Francis Poulenc*, 299.

For his opera, Poulenc followed Bernanos's text almost to the letter, refashioning the original dialogues into a somewhat condensed, though still intact, libretto. With only minor exceptions (i.e., Act I, scene 1, and Act III, scene 3; see Appendix), the libretto consists solely of Bernanos's original prose, which, for the most part, Poulenc wanted to enhance and reinforce, not change or transform, through his music. For the final scene, however, Poulenc took exception. His final stage directions for the opera reveal an entirely new ending, one where Blanche assumes complete responsibility for her own death. Immediately following the execution of Mother Jeanne, which leaves Constance alone to finish the *Salve Regina*, the score directions indicate:

[Cue 72] Blanche, her face stripped of all fear, clears a passage in the crowd where she emerges.

Constance notices her. Her face radiates happiness. She stops for a brief moment.

[Cue 73] Resuming her march to the scaffold, she smiles tenderly at Blanche.

[With the penultimate drop of the guillotine, Constance's voice is silenced.] Incredibly calm, Blanche emerges from the astonished crowd and climbs to the scaffold.

[The final blow of the guillotine marks Blanche's death.] [Cue 75] The crowd begins to disperse.⁵⁵

Unlike the Blanche of Le Fort's or Bernanos's texts, Poulenc's Blanche ascends the scaffold of her own accord and in so doing faces her profound fear of death with unprecedented resolution and boldness. This voluntary advance to a certain, torturous death emphasizes the depth of Blanche's transformation from fear to courage. As Poulenc repeatedly insisted, his opera was about the transfer of grace, and by consistently emphasizing Blanche's internal conflict and

⁵⁵ "Blanche, le visage dépouillé de toute crainte, se fraye un passage dans la foule où elle se confond. . . . Constance l'aperçoit. Son visage s'irradie de bonheur. Elle s'arrête un court instant. . . . Reprenant sa marche à léchafaud, elle sourit doucement à Blanche. . . . Incroyablement calme, Blanche émerge de la foule stupéfaite et monte au supplice. . . . La foule commence à se disperser." Poulenc, *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, 239–242.

particularly its resolution when she finally finds the strength to accept her destined martyrdom, he effectively reasserts the supremacy and power of divine grace. In an interview with Claude Rostand, Poulenc asserted,

If it is a work about fear, it is equally and above all, in my opinion, a work about grace and the transfer of grace. This is why my Carmelites climb the scaffold with an extraordinary calm and confidence. For are not confidence and calm at the base of all mystical experience?⁵⁶

As discussed in chapter two, Poulenc demonstrates this equal emphasis on fear and grace throughout the opera musically through his discerning motivic treatment. Even more poignant, however, is the opera's concluding scene, wherein Poulenc echoes his dramatic emphasis on grace and the mystical nature of both the nuns' sacrifice as well as Blanche's transformation through his stirring, yet restrained musical setting of the *Salve Regina*. The scene is prepared with a dissonant, almost violent interlude that features a prominent brass fanfare above hints of the creeping "Death" ostinato, which Poulenc transported from the Prioress's death scene in Act I (Act III, scene 4, interlude, cue A).⁵⁷ The orchestra grows in both dissonance and volume through the interlude to cadence on a fortississimo (*fff*) polychord accented with a powerful tam-tam roll that subsequently dissolves into the restrained funeral march of the *Salve Regina* (Act III, scene 4, interlude, cue F). The introduction to the Carmelites' hymn is marked *Très calme et paisible* (Very calm and peaceful), a stark contrast to the severity of the interlude that immediately precedes it (Act III, scene 4, cue 62). With a subdued, somber tranquility, the low

⁵⁶ "Si c'est une pièce sur la peur, c'est également et surtout, à mon avis, une pièce sur la grâce et le transfert de la grâce. C'est pourquoi mes Carmélites monteront à l'échafaud avec un calme et une confiance extraordinaires. La confiance et le calme ne sont-ils pas à la base de toute expérience mystique?" Francis Poulenc, *Entretiens avec Claude Rostand* (Paris: Julliard, 1954), 213–214.

⁵⁷ This interlude—as well as the three orchestral interludes in Act I—was not original to Poulenc's opera. Following the French premiere of the opera in June 1957, Poulenc added the interludes to facilitate scene changes. Gendre, "Dialogues des Carmélites: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera," 309. The interludes were not included in the vocal score of the opera, but can be found as inserts in the orchestral score. Francis Poulenc, *Dialogues des Carmélites/Dialoghi delle Carmelitane*, text of the drama by Georges Bernanos (Milan: Ricordi, 1957).

strings begin repeating the ominous “Death” ostinato, above which the woodwinds introduce the solemn melody that will soon become the nuns’ *Salve Regina*. The chorus, with closed mouths (*bouche fermée*), interjects a sustained A in octaves, and their combined ethereal, wordless voice enhances the sacred, even mystical atmosphere of the scene’s opening. Then, the Carmelites begin their hymn (Act III, scene 4, cue 63). Their gentle praises to the Virgin Mary, sung in unison, exude a calmness and sense of controlled confidence in their religious devotion. Immediately following the first crash of the guillotine, however, the Carmelites’ hymn doubles in intensity (Act III, scene 4, cue 64). They repeat the opening phrase, now fortissimo, as a powerful reassertion of their faith. The chorus, perhaps in awe, supports the nuns’ *Salve Regina* with a four-part wordless chant that evokes an almost supernatural effect. As the Carmelites’ voices drop out one by one with each fall of the guillotine’s blade, the hymn gradually returns to the subdued and introverted mood of the scene’s opening (Act III, scene 4, cue 69). The intimate atmosphere draws the focus further inward, and this final scene becomes less about the violence of the revolution than about the depth and poignancy of the Carmelites’ faith.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, both Marthe Keller and Robert Carsen have emphasized the intimate religiosity of this final scene through their minimalistic staging and pointed dramatic emphasis on the Carmelites. Robert Carsen, however, took this idea one step further. In an interview with Hans Alma and T. Hetty Zock, Carsen explained his conception of the final scene: “The guillotine scene [is] a catharsis, a release. It is a step on the way to, a voyage to grace. Therefore, I made it like a dance.”⁵⁸ Throughout the final scene of Carsen’s production, the Carmelites perform a sort of synchronized, interpretive dance. When accompanied by the Carmelites’ lyrical *Salve Regina*, the movements of the dance appear to be not only cathartic, but perhaps even ritualistic in their simplicity and gracefulness. With each

⁵⁸ Alma and Zock, “The Impact of a Religious Opera on Secular Audience,” 137.

blow of the guillotine, one nun slowly drops out of the dance, lowers herself to the floor, and lies down in the shape of a cross. When only Blanche remains, the stage lights gradually converge to focus on her as she resumes Constance's halted dance, only to be cut short prematurely. Unlike her sisters, however, Blanche does not fall to the floor at the sound of the guillotine. Instead, to the final iterations of the "Nobility and Honor" motive, she extends her arms outward, then slightly upward as if reaching to the heavens. As such, her death comes across as a sort of divine transcendence. Once again, the theme of grace becomes paramount and the revolutionary conflict is dismissed as essentially irrelevant to the opera's exclusively spiritual resolution.

Carsen's production effectively emphasizes what Poulenc stated all along, that the opera's subject was not the French Revolution, but rather the personal themes of fear and grace. In the opera's final scene, Poulenc continued to discount the external conflict of the revolution in order to reassert these two themes. After all, in the opera, Blanche's real persecutor is neither the republican government nor the revolutionary mob, but rather her own fear, as evidenced by the frequency and prominence of musical motives associated with fear throughout the opera (see chapter two). Her attempts to conquer her fear, depicted musically through the collection of motives associated with grace and vicarious redemption, at first lack the necessary strength for complete resolution, that is, until the concluding scene of the opera, when Blanche finally finds sufficient courage to confront her personally invasive fear of death. Such a confrontation could hardly be depicted on stage, but, through a careful manipulation of musical motives, Poulenc reveals the young postulant's internal turmoil. As Blanche's compatriots march boldly to the guillotine, the orchestra ominously repeats the grueling "Death" ostinato that had pervaded the Prioress's death scene in Act I. The motive accompanies the nuns relentlessly through most of their *Salve Regina*, but ends definitively only when Blanche emerges from the crowd and takes

her first steps toward a willing martyrdom as she courageously faces her worst fear—her fear of death. The final measures of the opera, marked by one last calming iteration of the “Nobility and honor” motive, reveal that Blanche, having successfully confronted her internal persecutor, has at last attained the honor and peace that she had so diligently sought by fulfilling the vow of martyrdom that she had previously made only with reluctance. In the end, Blanche’s redemption becomes all the more poignant because she never quite overcomes her fear, but rather finds the strength to act despite it. As Stanley Rachman explained in a psychological study of fear and courage,

Fearlessness is often regarded as synonymous with courage, but there is some value in distinguishing it from another view of courage. As well as fearlessness, or the absence of fear, we can recognize the occurrence of perseverance despite fear. One could argue that such perseverance is the purest form of courage.⁵⁹

Blanche demonstrates this distinct form of courage when she calmly ascends the scaffold and resolutely walks toward her certain death, chanting the last stanza of the *Veni Creator*. Her praise to God the Father, His Son, and the Holy Spirit reaffirm a divinely apportioned faith that is strong enough to eclipse her fear, thereby offering a powerful example of religious endurance.

Perhaps it was this message—Blanche’s redemption through courageous faith and divine grace—that had such a profound impact on Poulenc. As discussed in chapter one, when he chose the text for the libretto, Poulenc was at the beginning of what would prove to be a long series of personal, professional, and emotional trials. As Claude Gendre has reiterated, the series of personal crises Poulenc endured while composing *Dialogues des Carmélites*, which consisted principally of difficulties in his complex relationship with Lucien Roubert, contributed to the composer’s intimate treatment of Blanche, her fear of death, and her ultimate redemption

⁵⁹ Stanley J. Rachman, *Fear and Courage* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1990), 297, quoted in Lesley A. Wright, “Profiles in Courage: Two French Operatic Heroines,” *Fu Jen Studies* 30 (1997): 58–70.

through grace.⁶⁰ Furthermore, as he attempted to struggle against his deteriorating emotional state, Poulenc turned increasingly to religion. As he sank deeper into depression, he petitioned the Carmelites in Dallas, Texas, to pray for his health and later made a pilgrimage to the sanctuary of the Virgin Mary at Rocamadour, hoping to find there, as he had before, a sort of spiritual and emotional rejuvenation.⁶¹ During the four-year ordeal, he found some degree of solace in working on the *Dialogues*. At several points during its composition, Poulenc threw himself into his work in order to alleviate or at least distract himself from his emotional turmoil.⁶² As discussed before, he identified keenly with Blanche, for Poulenc's fears—of Lucien's death, of abandonment, of his own inadequacies—in part echoed those of his protagonist. Certainly, Poulenc's emphasis on the psychological, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the story, as opposed to the political, reflects the direction of his personal concerns during the opera's composition, just as Le Fort's and Bernanos's politicization of the story reflected the concerns and fears that were foremost in each of their respective minds.

In addition, Poulenc's eschewal of the political dimension of Bernanos's dialogues reflects his general disinclination toward political involvement. Outwardly, it appears that Poulenc largely distanced himself from politics. Throughout the 1920s, Poulenc, along with the rest of "Les Six," remained largely apolitical.⁶³ A decade later, when French politics and culture became polarized over the question of fascism, he still refrained from obvious involvement in the

⁶⁰ Gendre, "Dialogues des Carmélites: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera"; Gendre, "Dialogues des Carmélites: Rencontre spirituelle entre Bernanos et Poulenc"; Gendre, "The Literary Destiny of the Sixteen Carmelite Martyrs of Compiègne and the Role of Emmet Lavery."

⁶¹ Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse*, 395.

⁶² Gendre, "Dialogues des Carmélites: The Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera," 304; see also Georges Auric to Francis Poulenc, August 1954, Poulenc, *Correspondance 1910–1963*, 801; Francis Poulenc to Denise Bourdet, 24 March 1955, Poulenc, *Correspondance 1910–1963*, 816.

⁶³ Jane F. Fulcher, "Musical Style, Meaning, and Politics in France on the Eve of the Second World War," *Journal of Musicology* 8 (Fall 1995): 430.

conflict.⁶⁴ Other than a handful of pieces composed in the 1940s, Poulenc's works do not explicitly address political themes. The few exceptions, notably *Figure humaine* (1943), and *Deux poèmes de Louis Aragon* ("C" and "Fêtes galantes," 1943), reflect the frustration and despair Poulenc endured during the German Occupation of France at the end of World War II, when political issues became paramount even for an otherwise apolitical artist. As Jean Cocteau's biographer Francis Steegmuller explained,

The Occupation of Paris by the Germans from 1940 to 1944 was a period so macabre as to defy description even by those who were there, and to baffle understanding by those who were not. It was possible, it has to be said, to avoid "collaboration" with the conquerors in only one way—by refusing any activity that required licensing. But almost any activity did require licensing, and no license was given without German approval. To refuse to ask for a license meant, for artists, no publication of books, no production of plays, no showing of films, no concerts, no exhibitions. One became a "collaborator" merely by legally exercising one's profession.⁶⁵

Although Poulenc did continue composing, performing, and recording during the Occupation, he, along with many of his contemporaries, actively resisted the German restrictions.⁶⁶ In the fall of 1941, Poulenc became involved with a group of French musicians called the "Comité National des Musicens," a Resistance group that, according to Roland Penrose,

published a clandestine newspaper, *Le Musicien d'Aujourd'hui*, which exposed the activities of traitors in the musical world, pointed out the tendentious nature of musical events organized by Vichy and Radio-Paris and endeavored to safeguard the essential values of French music, which were becoming submerged beneath a flood of a certain type of German music specially favored by the Nazis. Their desire was to save French music and her musicians from being stolen from them by the Germans who had laid claim on racial grounds to several French

⁶⁴ In her insightful study of music and politics in France on the eve of World War II, Jane Fulcher noted that Poulenc's emphasis on peasant folklore and religious tradition in his works in the late 1930s was a decision, conscious or not, to compose in a style and aesthetic directly opposing that promulgated by the Popular Front. Fulcher, "Musical Style, Meaning, and Politics in France," 434–436.

⁶⁵ Francis Steegmuller, *Cocteau: A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1970), 439–440.

⁶⁶ Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse*, 279.

composers such as Berlioz, and banned all who could be suspected of Jewish origins.⁶⁷

Poulenc, who had embraced French folk music throughout the interwar period, held on to his nationalist leanings despite the German Occupation, and his continued patriotism is reflected in the six *Chansons villageoises* (1942) as well as his ballet *Les Animaux modèles* (1940–1941).⁶⁸ For Poulenc, however, the greatest toll of the Occupation was on his personal life. For four years, he endured a forced separation from several close friends, such as Darius Milhaud and Max Jacob, as well as a partial exile from the Paris he so loved, which sent him into bouts of deep depression.⁶⁹ By 1943, his personal frustrations with the Occupation had intensified and he became more uncompromising in his musical expressions of resistance. In *Figure humaine* (1943) and his setting of Louis Aragon's poem "C," Poulenc revealed a poignant despair for the destruction of war.⁷⁰ These works were the exception, however, and Poulenc's musico-political tirade seems to have ended with the Liberation.

Despite its relative brevity, this period of politically motivated composition can be seen as part of an overall trend in Poulenc's oeuvre. As Gay Grosz and Susan Musselman have recently averred, Poulenc's works were often reflective of his state of mind at the time of their composition.⁷¹ For example, Poulenc began composing his first sacred work, the non-liturgical *Litanies à la Vierge noire* (1936), almost immediately after rediscovering his own Catholic faith. Additionally, many of his other religious compositions, such as the *Stabat Mater* (1950) or the Mass in G Major (1937), date from times of mourning or reflection in Poulenc's life, whereas many of his lighter compositions (for example, *Le Bal masqué*, 1932) were written during

⁶⁷ Roland Penrose, *In the Service of the People* (London: William Heinemann, 1945), 33.

⁶⁸ Daniel, *Francis Poulenc*, 43–44; Ivry, *Francis Poulenc*, 124–127.

⁶⁹ Daniel, *Francis Poulenc*, 43–44.

⁷⁰ Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse*, 288–292; Daniel, *Francis Poulenc*, 44–45; Ivry, *Francis Poulenc*, 129.

⁷¹ Gay Grosz, "An Analysis of the Historical and Biographical Influences on the Music of Francis Poulenc as Portrayed in His *Les Soirées de Nazelles*," DMA diss., Louisiana State University, 2009; Susan Musselman, "Cohesion of Composer and Singer: The Female Singers of Poulenc," DMA diss., The Ohio State University, 2007.

periods of great social activity.⁷² As the composer himself often insisted, “My music is my portrait,” and Poulenc’s compositions reflect the diverse and often contradictory aspects of his personality.⁷³

Poulenc’s operas are a case in point. As discussed earlier, Poulenc composed *Dialogues des Carmélites* as a highly personal, internal drama, which he infused with his own deeply personal fears and emotional torment. His primary concerns were the underlying themes of fear and the transfer of grace, and accordingly, he emphasized Blanche’s transformation over the course of the drama. As Denis Waleckx has explained, Poulenc often internalized the action in his dramatic works, centering the plot on the psychological evolution of his protagonists as opposed to external events or conflicts.⁷⁴ Poulenc’s other two completed operas, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (1944) and *La Voix humaine* (1958), similarly reflect the composer’s tendency toward introspection and his concern with inner transformation, although each opera presents these themes in a strikingly different context.

Although Poulenc had attended the premiere of Guillaume Apollinaire’s surrealist play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* in 1917, he did not begin considering it as a possible subject for an opera until he rediscovered the play in the late 1930s.⁷⁵ He set the project aside after the onset of World War II, but in the summer of 1944, anticipating the end of the Occupation and the war, Poulenc returned to work on the opera and completed it in August 1945.⁷⁶ Despite a few cuts to the text, the opera follows Apollinaire’s original play in recounting the tale of a woman, Thérèse,

⁷² Poulenc composed the *Stabat Mater* in memory of his friend Christian Bérard after his unexpected death in February 1949, and he dedicated the Mass in G Major to the memory of his father. Poulenc wrote *Le Bal masqué*, a “profane cantata” for baritone and chamber orchestra, during an extended stay in Paris in 1932, during which time he was nearly overloaded with numerous professional and social obligations. Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse*, 190–193, 242–243, 361.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, viii.

⁷⁴ Denis Waleckx, “In Search of a Libretto,” 260–261.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 255–256; Daniel, *Francis Poulenc*, 44–45.

⁷⁶ Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse*, 295–298.

who, being dissatisfied with her life as a woman, transforms herself into a man, Tirésias, and sets off to make her fortune in the world as a male. To complement her reversal of roles, Thérèse/Tirésias's husband dons his wife's abandoned clothing and resolves to find a way to bear children without a woman. After a series of increasingly absurd episodes, the couple is eventually reconciled, and the opera ends in a wild finale with a general appeal to "go make children."⁷⁷ Considering Apollinaire's surrealist plot and its frequent incongruities, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* may initially appear to be more externalized than Poulenc's later two operas. As Denis Waleckx has argued, however, ultimately, the opera proves to be an account of inner transformation—primarily, Thérèse's transformation into Tirésias, but secondarily, the Husband's appropriation of his wife's discarded role as child bearer.⁷⁸

Poulenc described his third opera, a setting of Jean Cocteau's *La Voix humaine* (1930), as a "musical confession" inasmuch as it resonated with contemporaneous events in his personal life.⁷⁹ The monologue, spoken into a telephone, is a turbulent, one-sided conversation between a young woman known only as "Elle" (She) and a lover who has just left her for another woman. While composing the opera, Poulenc struggled through another intense, emotional drama, albeit this time, his insecurities, self-doubt, and fear of abandonment were greatly exaggerated, if not unfounded. After Lucien's death, Poulenc had begun a passionate affair with a young career sergeant, Louis Gautier, and despite occasional forced separations due to Louis's military obligations, the couple's relationship flourished.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, Poulenc felt a lingering despair. As he explained in a letter to Hervé Dugardin, "Just as Blanche was myself, so *Elle* is again myself, in relation to Louis, because life will no doubt deprive me, in one way or another, of this

⁷⁷ Quoted in Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse*, 297.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁷⁹ Francis Poulenc to Rose Dercourt-Plaut, 30 January 1959, Poulenc, *Selected Correspondence 1915–1968*, 257.

⁸⁰ See Francis Poulenc to Pierre Bernac, Easter 1958, in Poulenc, *Selected Correspondence 1915–1968*, 252.

angel.”⁸¹ His depression and emotional turmoil during this period revealed themselves in *La Voix humaine* as a renewed, but different intensity of expression. Unlike the deep religiosity of *Dialogues des Carmélites*, *La Voix humaine* evokes an array of profoundly human sentiments. Through its highly controlled vocal treatment and numerous changes of tempo and character, *La Voix* reveals a series of extremely diverse feelings and emotions that reflect the different psychological states of the heroine. Neither political nor religious, the opera is instead a passionate expression of emotions that mirrors the composer’s recurrent struggles with depression. As Poulenc told Louis Aragon, “I think I needed the experience of the spiritual and metaphysical anguish of *Les Carmélites* to avoid betraying the terribly human anguish of Jean Cocteau’s superb text. I hope I have succeeded in my task.”⁸² As with *Dialogues des Carmélites*, Poulenc’s emotional torment drew him toward depicting an internal narrative as he sought musical means to emphasize the underlying psychological transformation of his opera’s protagonist.

Thus, when considered in the context of Poulenc’s life and works, the composer’s avoidance of the political elements in Le Fort’s and Bernanos’s texts seems understandable, or at least consistent with his compositional approach. Moreover, on a more general level, Poulenc’s resistance to politicizing his operas parallels what appears to be an overall trend in twentieth-century operatic composition. In his insightful study on opera and politics, political theorist John Bokina argues that contemporary repertoire has lost much of the distinctive political spirit that once characterized operatic composition.⁸³ As one example, Bokina cites the French rescue

⁸¹ Francis Poulenc to Hervé Dugardin, 30 March 1958, in Poulenc, *Correspondance 1910–1963*, 890. English translation from Denis Waleckx, “‘A Musical Confession’: Poulenc, Cocteau and *La Voix humaine*,” in *Francis Poulenc: Music, Art and Literature*, ed. Sidney Buckland and Myriam Chimènes (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1999), 321.

⁸² Francis Poulenc to Louis Aragon, 1 February 1959, in Poulenc, *Selected Correspondence 1915–1968*, 258.

⁸³ John Bokina, *Opera and Politics: From Monteverdi to Henze* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 2, 11–12, 69.

opera, which was an outgrowth of developments in French comic opera in the eighteenth century. Unlike the comic operas of the early Enlightenment, where “the resolution of social problems was merely a matter of adjustments within the existing social system,” rescue operas were characterized by resolutions that “frequently entailed a fundamental and abrupt alteration in the existing relations of political power.”⁸⁴ Moreover, these resolutions were the outcome of “deliberate actions by the hero or heroine with the assistance or acclaim of the chorus of virtuous citizens.”⁸⁵ The resulting operas, such as those by Luigi Cherubini, Etienne-Nicolas Méhul, and Jean François Lesueur, embodied the political spirit of the French Revolution with their emphasis on the importance of virtuous governance and their examples of effective political structures.⁸⁶ Later in the nineteenth century, as this genre of operas disappeared from the repertory, however, the political spirit that they embodied more or less vanished as well. Bokina cites several other operas set during the French Revolution, among them Poulenc’s *Dialogues des Carmélites*, as representative of this trend:

Several later operas—from Umberto Giordano’s *Andrea Chénier* (1896) and Jules Massenet’s *Thérèse* (1907) to Gottfried von Einem’s *Dantons Tod* (1947), Francis Poulenc’s *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1957), and John Corigliano’s *Ghosts of Versailles* (1991)—have set historical or fictional incidents from the Revolution, but all are pervaded by greater or lesser degrees of estrangement from the politics of the great event.⁸⁷

More particularly, however, Poulenc’s fundamentally spiritual translation of Bernanos’s *Dialogues des Carmélites* is representative of another trend in late twentieth-century operatic repertory: the depiction of a saintly protagonist on a quest for spiritual truth. As Siglind Bruhn has noted, “saintly persons began to appear as operatic protagonists within years after the end of World War II and continued to feature in unabated intensity and frequency as the second

⁸⁴ Ibid., 69.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 68.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 69.

millennium drew to a close,” despite it being “an epoch marked by widespread lack of interest in conventional religiosity and a deliberate pluralism of values, a time that shuns the idea of universal moral exemplars.”⁸⁸ In examining this phenomenon, Bruhn hypothesized that, in depicting these saintly protagonists, contemporary composers were expressing a need to learn from and be inspired by the dramatic representation of a successful quest for spiritual transcendence. Poulenc’s depiction of Blanche’s spiritual transformation in *Dialogues des Carmélites*, then, falls in line with the more than thirty other operas from the second half of the twentieth century that feature characters “who behave courageously despite their fear, who struggle for certainty in the midst of doubt, who see to a perceived task at the cost of great hardship and abuse, and who in order to follow their inner voice are ready to sacrifice happiness, safety, and sometimes even life itself.”⁸⁹ For Poulenc, who was at the time struggling through complex emotional turmoil, professional obstacles, self-doubt, and romantic disappointment, Blanche’s spiritual journey likely appeared as a powerful symbol of hope, an example of the transcendent power of divine grace. In the opera, these sentiments were made all the more powerful in that Blanche had to come to a similar realization herself. Despite her profound weakness, despite her fears and self-doubts, in the end, she finally came to understand the profound truth of her portentous assertion to the Prioress at the beginning of the opera (Act I, scene 2, cue 47):

The Prioress: Great trials await you, my daughter.

Blanche: What does it matter, if God will grant me the strength.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Bruhn, *Saints in the Limelight*, 586.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 587.

⁹⁰ “De grandes épreuves vous attendent, ma fille./Qu’importe, si Dieu me donne la force.” Poulenc, *Dialogues des Carmélites*, 44–45.

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APPENDIX: COMPARISON BETWEEN BERNANOS'S AND POULENC'S TEXTS¹

Tableau, scene, in Bernanos	Brief description of scene		Act, scene, in Poulenc
	Bernanos	Poulenc	
I, i–iv	In a conversation with his father, the Chevalier de la Force expresses concern regarding Blanche's safety in traveling among the rebellious crowd. Blanche returns home and informs her father of her decision to become a Carmelite nun.	(A portion of the text for this scene in Poulenc's opera is an interpolation of the events surrounding Blanche's birth, which in Bernanos's text had been presented without dialogue in the prologue.)	I, i
II, i	Blanche is interviewed by Mme de Croissy, the Prioress of the Carmelite order in Compiègne, and is received into the order.		I, ii
II, ii–v	<i>Blanche is received as a postulant. Afraid of the dark, she ignores the rules of the order and leaves her cell door open. The doctor reveals the Prioress's failing health.</i> ²		
II, vi	Constance and Blanche discuss the impending death of their Prioress. To Blanche's horror, Constance proposes that they offer their own lives for that of their dying Prioress.		I, iii
II, vii–x	On her deathbed, the Prioress commends Blanche to Mother Marie. The Prioress becomes almost delirious with a consuming fear of death, has a vision of the destruction of the convent, and, with Blanche at her side, dies in withering agony.		I, iv
II, xi	Blanche and Constance keep vigil over the Prioress's body. Blanche is left alone momentarily and tries to flee, but is intercepted by Mother Marie.		II, i

¹ Table adapted from Herrold, "Francis Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmelites*," 46–59.

² Italics indicate scenes omitted by Poulenc for his opera.

III, i	Blanche and Constance speculate on the choice of a new Prioress.	II, i, Interlude (Int.)
III, ii	The new Prioress, Mme Lidoine, addresses the community and reminds the order of their devotion to prayer.	II, ii
III, iii–vi	<i>In a private discussion, Mother Marie opposes Blanche taking the veil, although the Prioress vows her support. Blanche takes the veil.</i>	
III, vii	The Chevalier de la Force arrives at the convent to visit Blanche and receives exceptional permission to speak with her.	II, ii
III, viii	The Chevalier tries to convince Blanche to leave the convent, but Blanche insists that she feels safe there.	II, ii, Int.
III, ix–III, xi	<i>The Chevalier speaks with the priest before his departure. An inventory of the convent is taken. The District Commission enters the convent to interrogate the nuns, and Mother Marie defends Blanche against their insistent questioning.</i>	
III, xii–III, xiii	The priest takes his last mass with the Carmelites. Blanche asks him what he will do to avoid being killed by the revolutionaries.	II, iv (cues 63–66)
III, xiv–IV, iii	<i>Blanche learns that Mother Marie has answered for her before God and becomes overjoyed. The Carmelites casually discuss martyrdom while working in the garden. The Prioress learns that the government has suspended religious vows and reads the decree to her daughters. Blanche asks whether the Prioress will uphold the government's decree. The convent is pillaged by the commissioners and the crowd.</i>	

IV, iv–v	The statue of the infant Jesus (<i>le Petit Roi de Glorie</i>) is presented to Blanche. Startled by cries from the crowd outside the convent, Blanche drops the statue.	II, iv (cues 86–88)
IV, vi–vii	<i>The Prioress tells Blanche of her decision to release her from the order. The priest holds a clandestine ceremony for Good Friday.</i>	
IV, viii	The Carmelites discuss the tenuous political situation in France. Mother Marie suggests that they offer themselves as martyrs for the sake of their nation, a proposal that the Prioress immediately refutes.	II, iv (cues 69–73)
IV, ix	<i>The Carmelites discuss the Holy Agony.</i>	(The final line of the scene is reattributed to Mother Jeanne in II, iv, mm. 242–248.)
IV, x–xi	The priest rushes into the convent seeking refuge from the revolutionary mob. A commissioner reads the decree of expulsion.	II, iv (cues 74–84)
IV, xii	<i>No dialogue. A view of the convent, left devastated by the mob.</i>	
IV, xiii	Mother Marie proposes the vow of martyrdom. The nuns take a secret vote. After Constance retracts her lone opposing vote, the Carmelites pronounce the vow of martyrdom. After taking the vow, Blanche flees the convent.	III, i
IV, xiv–V, iv	<i>The Prioress returns and learns that the nuns have taken a vow of martyrdom. Mother Marie asks permission to go to Paris and search for Blanche. Blanche returns to her family’s home only to find that her father has been arrested. She appears before the revolutionary tribunal and secures the freedom of her father.</i>	
V, v	The Carmelites are expelled from their convent.	III, i, Int.

V, vi–vii	<i>The priest returns and blesses the Carmelites. They learn that the Marquis de la Force has been guillotined.</i>	
V, viii	Mother Marie confronts Blanche at the Hôtel de la Force in order to give her the address of Rose Ducor, where, Mother Marie assures, she can find safety.	III, ii
V, ix	Blanche learns that the Carmelites have been arrested.	III, ii, Int.
V, x–xi	<i>Blanche arrives at Rose Ducor's house to tell Mother Marie that the Carmelites have been arrested and to plead for assistance in helping them. The priest arrives as Blanche is leaving and advises Mother Marie against going to Compiègne.</i>	
V, xii–xiv	The Prioress reassures the Carmelites after their first night in prison. She assumes responsibility for the vow of martyrdom and blesses her daughters. The Carmelites are condemned to death.	III, iii
		(Poulenc includes substantial parts of the decree of condemnation, which is referred to only indirectly by Bernanos.)
V, xv	<i>No dialogue. Rose Ducor presents Mother Marie with le Petit Roi de Glorie, which had been with the Carmelites in prison.</i>	
V, xvi	The priest informs Mother Marie of the Carmelites' condemnation.	III, iii, Int.
V, xvii	The Carmelites march to their execution, singing the <i>Salve Regina</i> and the <i>Veni Creator</i> . Blanche appears at the last to join them in martyrdom.	III, iv
