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Georges Bernanos
and Francis Poulenc

Catholic Convergences
in *Dialogues of the Carmelites*

FRANCIS POULENC'S *DIALOGUES OF THE CARMELITES* RANKS as one of the most Catholic operas of the twentieth century, as theologically insightful as it is lyrically beautiful. Except perhaps for Olivier Messiaen's modernist masterpiece *Saint François d'Assise* (which has sadly had only one U.S. production to date, San Francisco Opera, 2000), no other opera in the canon combines twentieth-century musical sensibilities with such profound theological themes on Catholic mysticism, martyrdom, and redemption. In this regard *Dialogues* has no peer in stature, recognition, and performance. Part of the opera's beauty is due to Poulenc's own musical genius; part is due to Georges Bernanos's text that Poulenc was inspired to use as his libretto; and part is due to the deep understanding of Catholic faith that both Poulenc and Bernanos shared.

Composed in 1956, the opera is based on the true story of sixteen Carmelite nuns of Compiègne, guillotined during the final throes of the French Revolution's Reign of Terror. Their story of martyrdom is a remarkable episode in the history of the Catholic faith in revolutionary France. As early as September 1792, the Carmelites of Compiègne, like all other monastic religious institutions

in France, were forced to leave their cloister and disband. Forbidden by law to meet or hold religious services, they decided secretly to make a corporate “act of consecration whereby they would offer themselves as a sacrifice that the ills afflicting the Church and our unhappy kingdom might cease.”¹ The disbanded nuns were thus arrested on June 21, 1794, for the crime of assembling illegally. They were placed in a prison at Compiègne with another order of religious women, the English Benedictines of Cambrai, who were awaiting their deportation back to England. During the three weeks they shared in prison, the two communities of nuns clandestinely prayed and offered comfort to one another. The Carmelites were then transferred to the Conciergerie in Paris on July 12 to await their trial and execution. For four days they remained there, comforting prisoners and secretly celebrating the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel on July 16. As the documented records of the Revolutionary Tribunal attest, they were judged guilty of being counter-revolutionaries and were executed on July 17, 1794.² There were numerous eyewitness reports that the Carmelites sang together the *Miserere*, the *Salve Regina*, and the *Te Deum* as they were led to the scaffold. They intoned the *Veni Creator* at the foot of the scaffold, and sang the *Laudate Dominum omnes gentes* as each nun climbed to her death. As they were guillotined, their voices diminished until only the Prioress was left singing, the last to die. Ten days after their execution, the Reign of Terror ended, and French Catholics immediately interpreted the martyrdom of the Carmelites as a mystical expiation for the sins of France. The cult surrounding these nuns was kept alive not only by the French faithful, but by the Benedictine nuns of Cambrai, now returned to Stanbrook Abbey, England. The sixteen Carmelites were beatified by the Church in 1906 and, as their cult spread, their story became the inspiration for a best-selling novel, two dramas, a film, and Poulenc’s opera.³

Given the often clichéd notion that the twentieth century was the most secular of times, it is surprising that Poulenc’s *Dialogues* has been such a success, both in his own life and in the contempo-

rary canon of musical opera today. It is with regard to this point that I would like to consider the historical circumstances and spiritual conjunctions from which this opera was produced. I will frame the thesis as two questions: First, how did traditional Catholicism become intellectually compatible with all that was modern and progressive in French culture in the early part of the twentieth century? The second question follows: How are Georges Bernanos and Francis Poulenc artistic players in this Catholic revival? In answering these questions, we can understand *Dialogues of the Carmelites* as an artistic production that is at once a Catholic story of heroism and faith and yet speaks to the modern world, an opera for the postwar period of Europe in the 1950s and one resonant with our contemporary struggle with Christian faith and martyrdom.

The French Catholic Revival

An answer to the first question begins in the historical setting of the opera. The French Revolution's historical importance in the development of Western cultural discourse is usually—and perhaps reductively—connected to such dialectical tropes as the triumph of reason over the superstitions of religion, the reign of science over the age of faith, and the ascendancy of egalitarian political democracy over traditional class distinctions and the abuses of absolute power. Indeed, many historians see the French Enlightenment and the concomitant revolution that followed as markers for what is called “the Modern”—the modern consciousness, the modern state, and modern philosophy. These categories developed in Western thought from the initial stirrings of eighteenth-century France.⁴ Enlightenment culture fostered a belief, often enshrined in the term “philosophical positivism,” that science and natural evolution would progressively remake the world into a better place. By the time of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) there was an emerging consensus among Western philosophers and intellectuals that the human person was biologically and socially determined, and that

reality was merely the empirical phenomena seen, the scientific observations recorded and interpreted.

Philosophical positivism found root as an aesthetic vision in the stark realism of the French naturalists. Honoré de Balzac and Emile Zola, major exemplars of naturalism in nineteenth-century France, portrayed the minute details of reality in an attempt to offer an almost photographic reproduction of the contemporary social afflictions affecting society. Their outlook was informed by two basic principles of positivism: biological heritage and social setting. The human person is merely the sum total of genetic inheritance and is further determined by social environment. The literature of this movement focused on the sordid and sometimes revolting aspects of life, usually related to the social upheavals wrought by the rampant industrialization of the period. Whether in the seedy, drab life of Paris boardinghouses in a novel such as Balzac's *Le Père Goriot* (1835) or in Zola's portrayal of the miserable life of coal miners in *Germinal* (1885), the aesthetics of naturalism eschewed any romantic escape into sentimentality. Rather, the aim of this aesthetic attempted to expose both human nature and society as they really were. Its artistic goal was to lift the veil of ignorance through acute observation, forcing readers to understand the brutal reality behind the comforting facades of modern life.

The legacy of philosophical positivism in Western culture was the eventual elevation of the sciences of anthropology, psychology, and sociology as the de facto discourses that best explained human life and offered solutions to improve it. One of the effects of this belief was the relegation of religion to the past, as something that would be abandoned over time for the more certain truths of modern science. Religion would more and more be understood as the work of the imagination. It would be only a matter of time, so the logic went, that reason would subordinate the flights of religious fancy to scientific constructions of human life and development. This legacy bifurcated faith and science, religion and modern society; they became fixed in the minds of many

as mutually exclusive terms, if not categorically antagonistic to one another.

This was certainly the cultural situation in France at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the eyes of the academy and the political institutions of the time, the Church was an enemy of everything modern. As one French politician put it in 1898, “The Church is incompatible with everything modern; it is a power of the past.”²⁵ How then did Catholicism—this most antimodern of religious traditions—suddenly become relevant, even fashionable, in France during the first half of the twentieth century? Why did Catholicism have such a huge influence in the intellectual salons of Paris, especially between the two world wars?

Part of Catholicism’s reappearance on the cultural and intellectual stage began in the 1870s and ’80s as a reaction to the anticlericalism of the French state and the intellectual positivism already noted in French society. Famous artists and intellectuals were converted or reconverted to the Catholic faith, finding in it a mystical, romantic defense against the “Reign of Science” that inundated their time. Many of these conversions were part of a conscious attempt to reimagine the crucial questions of modern life and art. By returning to Catholic belief and themes as the material for their work, these artists created a specific vision of French Catholicism, one that was prophetic in denouncing both the rationalism of the state as well as the bourgeois Christianity that made a too-easy concourse with industrial society. Many of these artists gained the attention of a wider French audience because Catholicism was never served up with triumphant, epistemological certainty or as morally uplifting drama; rather, Catholicism was inscribed in the midst of fallen, poor humanity, a place of constant struggle where the mysterious irruptions of grace might shine forth or manifest in profound ways in the lives of characters. The terrible conditions of modern life and its tragic consequences, so important to the French naturalist aesthetic, now become, in the hands of the Catholic revivalists, the site where an experience of faith is revealed.

Nowhere was this revival more in evidence than in French literature. Beginning with such figures as Joris-Karl Huysmans, León Bloy, and Charles Péguy in the late nineteenth century, and continuing on in Paul Claudel, Georges Bernanos, and François Mauriac into the mid-twentieth, these artists made Catholic literature and drama into an accomplished literary form that defended the spiritual reality of human life. With an emphasis on aesthetic considerations over rational modes of discourse, their literary works served to address and critique the reigning manners of bourgeois, materialist French society. Catholicism offered both a critique of the modern state and a powerful philosophical and artistic alternative. As the critic Ellis Hanson suggests, an alternative Catholic vision of the world was more creative, an artistic matrix that allowed the *rational* and *irrational* phenomena of life to coincide. The aesthetic and historical heritage of Catholicism—its theology, its cathedrals, its communion of saints, its rituals and sacraments, its music and art—spoke more powerfully of the full range of human experience. Hanson provocatively remarks, “Catholicism is itself an elaborate paradox. . . . The Church is at once modern and yet medieval, ascetic and yet sumptuous, spiritual and yet sensual, chaste and yet erotic, homophobic and yet homoerotic, suspicious of aestheticism and yet an elaborate work of art.”⁶ Hanson proposes that it is these lived paradoxes that made Catholicism such a powerful alternative to the rationalized, bourgeois state: to be Catholic—to have a Catholic vision of life—was to make of one’s life an artistic adventure, to understand one’s life as a work of art. Catholic faith became a cultural container and conceptual signifier for the paradoxes within the “modern” individual. Ironically, Catholicism becomes for these artists not so much a reaction *against* the modern but a new way to understand the modern.

The Jesuit historian Stephen Schloesser claims another important factor for Catholicism’s rise in stature in France during this period, one even more germane to a discussion of Poulenc’s opera. Schloesser notes that the Catholic revival takes on more urgency

after the trauma and grief of World War I. The French—and indeed all of Europe—were grieving in the aftermath of the Great War. The statistics are staggering: 1.3 million French soldiers were killed at the front; another 150,000 died from war-related causes; 1.1 million French lost a limb or were impaired by poison gas; 570,000 civilians died due to forced evacuations from their homes, occupation, bombardments, and disease; 600,000 widows and 760,000 orphans were left behind. The human loss was visible on every street corner. In addition to human losses, France also grieved its cultural loss as the standard bearer for modern civilization. Prewar values constructed under the aegis of intellectual positivism had been shattered. Before the war, French society fostered a belief in progress and an optimistic estimate of the social and moral strength of their country in leading this charge. But a postwar sense that civilization itself had perished in the trenches was part of a European-wide mood of numbed bewilderment.⁷

Another generation of French intellectuals, trying to make meaning of the serious dislocations and trauma of the war, turned anew to the one French tradition that had, more than any other, a history of dealing with loss and could speak of eternal truths. That many French Catholics (including many priests) served honorably in the war and were among its dead only strengthened the notion that faith and reason, Church and State, were false divisions. As Schloesser notes, the “need for a sacred union of opposing factions [in order to prosecute the war] had catalyzed a ‘rallying’ of Catholics to the Republic,” causing a reconciliation of Church and State in the attitudes of many.⁸ Now, after the war, Catholicism—a moral and cultural vision of French life as much as the practice of religious faith—was engaged by philosophers and intellectuals not so much to fix or explain away the tragedy of the war, but to transform the way one lived in its aftermath. As a way of restoring the break between the past and the present, Catholic artists and intellectuals engaged in a revivalist effort that reimagined the relationship between religion and culture not as antagonistic rivalry but as syn-

thesis. Such thinkers as the great French philosophers Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, and Gabriel Marcel (who converted in 1929), helped articulate this synthesis. Schloesser argues persuasively that Catholicism and modern civilization—the eternal and the avant-garde, mysterious grace and the modern grotesque, the mystical and the dissonant—could now be seen as categories that *informed* one another, *needed* one another to make sense of life.⁹

What made this revival so appealing was the attempt to reframe fundamental Catholic doctrines in modernist categories.¹⁰ Two Catholic doctrines in particular are germane to *The Dialogues of the Carmelites*: the doctrine of atonement and the doctrine of sacramentalism. Catholic atonement theology centers on Jesus Christ's desire to "atone" for a fallen and sinful humanity by substituting his life for ours on the cross—all as an act of love and hope for a promised future. The key insight of atonement theology is that sacrificial love thwarts, even cancels, the sinful actions of another. This doctrine of atonement gave a language and a dramatic narrative to many in a traumatized French society, a discourse that allowed their loss to be understood in terms of a larger horizon of spiritual meaning. Reimagining the war not in nationalist but in cosmic terms allowed French society to speak of human dignity and freedom unleashed from the bourgeois and technocratic discourses that produced both modern France and modern warfare. To be truly modern was not only to live in the conflict (what Schloesser calls "dissonance") between sinful nature and supernatural grace, but also to cooperate with the workings of that supernatural grace. At its best, atonement theology assumes that the Christian participates in the unfolding of Christian salvation by choosing to conform one's life to Christ's sacrificial love. This sense of mystical substitution—one person's life given freely for another's salvation—becomes dramatically rendered in many Catholic novels, most especially in the work of Bernanos, whose drama stirred Poulenc to compose his opera. If the martyrdom of the Carmelite nuns of Compiègne was understood as atoning for a sinful France during the bloody Reign of Terror, then

it was no leap to suggest to those traumatized by the war that their own war dead were protagonists in a larger drama of atonement, yet with one major difference: whereas the Carmelites consciously went to the guillotine as an act of love for God and country, the millions sacrificed in the war effort were pawns in the hands of the modern French state.

The sacramental character of Catholicism was perhaps even more central to the revivalists' efforts. Sacramentalism holds that created things are a visible "sign" of an invisible reality, a sign that both bears within itself and simultaneously points beyond itself to a deeper, more profound encounter with reality. This doctrine underlies the Catholic understanding of the sacraments and, on a larger scale, an understanding of the whole universe as one great system of inter-reflecting signs that ultimately point to the Creator. Catholic intellectuals, such as Jacques Maritain, discovered that the philosophical underpinnings of a sacramental vision of the world as a nexus of two interpenetrating planes of reality—seen and unseen, created and uncreated, natural and supernatural—fit nicely within other major philosophical undercurrents of the postwar French avant-garde. The synthesizing nature of Catholic realism was similar to the artistic movement of surrealism and magical realism, and had affinities with the political movement of socialist realism because they all attempted to combine the observed world of phenomena with an unseen, unobserved cause or effect. Thus, surrealism held that the conscious world of rational observation is not the deepest truth of one's life and must be discovered in the world of dreams and the unconscious. Magical realism held for a paradoxical union of opposites, one based on a rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality. Socialist and communist realism held that societal progress toward an unseen utopia in the future is a real possibility worth striving for. Thus, Catholicism's long philosophical and theological history shared with the modern avant-garde the belief that appearances deceive, that the deepest reality may be hidden within, and that substantial change is possible.¹¹

These two fundamental doctrines are at the heart of the “Catholic” revival in France between the world wars. In effect, Catholic intellectuals proposed that the tragedy of the war—and the concomitant senselessness that ensued—could find some understanding in the way Catholicism makes sense of reality. And they insisted that the human person bears within itself the possibility of a heroism that goes deeper than nationalism, that honor born out of charity is cosmic in proportion and realizes the Christian story of salvation. They saw in the mystery of human pain and suffering the enshrinement of God’s divine pain experienced in the folly of the Cross.

Georges Bernanos

This rather long prolegomena leads to the second question: How are Georges Bernanos and Francis Poulenc participants in this Catholic revival? The text that inspired Poulenc’s opera was written by Georges Bernanos (1888–1948), a deeply committed Christian and French patriot. His most famous work in English, *The Diary of a Country Priest* (1936), is still considered to be one of the great twentieth-century French novels. Bernanos’s many works denounced the distortion of Christianity into a respectable and genteel mediocrity. His protagonists are often saint-heroes whose virtues lie not in superheroic, conventional saintliness but precisely in their human frailty. Bernanos’s heroes, many of them priests, do not surpass humanity but assume it to its fullest consequences. What looks like failure on the surface is actually the way toward a dramatic moment of choice that brings his characters into an analogical relationship with a suffering God in Christ: they choose or accept heroic sacrifice as a conformation to Christ’s own self-sacrifice on the Cross. The main character of the *Diary of a Country Priest*, for instance, cries out impulsively to a young woman in his charge, “I’ll answer for your soul with mine.” In another famous Bernanos novel, *Under Satan’s Sun*, the character Mouchette, a precocious young woman, is redeemed by a priest’s own life. This concept of

“mystical substitution” that is so central in Bernanos—of one life answering for another—deeply moved Poulenc as he began composing his opera. In a letter to a friend Poulenc writes, “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.’”¹² Poulenc took to heart what Bernanos constantly emphasized in his work: the truly heroic life is lived when one assents to participate mystically in Christ’s agony on the Cross. For Bernanos, acting on this desire is the fullest freedom, the fullest actualization of human honor, the fullest act of love.

Bernanos began work on his own dramatic text of the Carmelite nuns in 1947, after being asked to write a screen adaptation of Gertrude von Le Fort’s 1931 novella, *Die Letzte am Schafott* (translated by Olga Marx in the United States in 1933 as *The Song at the Scaffold*).¹³ Le Fort, then a recent convert to Catholicism, had written the piece during the anxieties and postwar instabilities in Europe, especially the rise of German Fascism and Bolshevism in the late 1920s. She saw in these French martyred women a story of strength and fortitude that could give expression to her own fears about the future.

Le Fort’s innovation in telling the story is the creation of Blanche de la Force, the frightened novice who enters the convent initially as an escape from the unfolding terror of the Revolution and ends up mystically transformed, accepting the agony of martyrdom with her fellow sisters. Le Fort weaves Blanche’s destiny into the historical record. Blanche is at first happy upon entering the convent, taking the name of “Jesus in the Garden of Agony.” But as the Revolution begins to disrupt all semblance of security, she becomes terrified. She is further shaken by her Mother Superior’s agonizing death and consequently placed in the care of Mother Marie of the Incarnation. It is Mother Marie, momentarily in charge of the convent, who proposes their communal consecration of martyrdom as a mystical expiation for the sins of France. Blanche at first assents out of fidelity to her sisters, but she flees the convent during the

consecration. She returns to her father in Paris, and for two years witnesses the debased spectacle of the Revolutionary mob. Le Fort ends the story with the nuns arrested (except for Mother Marie who had been called away by the government) and soon to be guillotined. As the nuns sing the *Salve Regina* on the way to the scaffold, their voices diminish as each head falls. As the last nun sings from the foot of the scaffold, Blanche's frail voice is heard in the midst of the crowd:

She was singing. In her small, weak, child-like voice she sang without a tremor, exulting as a bird! All alone across the great terrible square she sang the *Veni Creator* of her Carmelite Sisters to the very end. . . . The Amen I did not hear—the furious women [in the mob] struck her down on the spot. . . . The rainbow over Revolution Square had died away. And yet I had the feeling that the Revolution was over. As a matter of fact, the Reign of Terror collapsed ten days later.¹⁴

Le Fort's novella was published in French through the efforts of Jacques Maritain in 1936, and it came to the attention of Father Raymond-Léopold Bruckberger, a Dominican friar who saw it as the basis for a film. Bruckberger signed a contract with Le Fort in 1946, and proposed that Bernanos write the dialogue. Intrigued by this offer late in his life, and already suffering from a terminal illness, Bernanos accepted the challenge as a way to fuse his art and his faith in a final literary testament. Le Fort's novella would become the source for Bernanos's text, though he did not have it in front of him as he prepared his own adaptation.

Bernanos's secretary comments in a letter written after her employer's death how she remembered Bernanos working on the piece: "What interested Bernanos in addition to the Carmelites, whom he prayed to each evening in order not to do something completely unworthy of them, was to know if, through these dialogues for the cinema, he could prove himself capable of writing for the theatre."¹⁵ Bernanos had written novels and polemical pieces before and dur-

ing World War II, but he had never tried his hand at drama. Alas, Bernanos wasn't to see his adaptation produced, for he died only weeks after it was finished. It was Albert Béguin, his literary executor, who had this final work published posthumously under the title *Dialogues des Carmélites* in 1949, the year after Bernanos's death.

Bernanos spent ten-hour-days working to complete the project, using his religious concerns as the prism through which his characters come to life. In his treatment of the story, Bernanos keeps Blanche as his central character but extends the role of Sister Constance (a minor character in Le Fort's rendition). He also adds the role of the Chevalier, the brother of Blanche and son of the Marquis de la Force. The invention of these characters helps to concentrate the action into a seamless thread centering on Blanche's growing realization of her identification with Christ's fear in the garden of Gethsemane. Bernanos deepens Blanche's psychological character by situating her fears against the desires of her overly protective brother who wants her to flee France; her fellow novice Sister Constance, who Blanche envies for her ability to live so peacefully in the midst of the terror; and the nuns who watch over her, the two prioresses and Mother Marie. Bernanos further dramatizes the conflict over their corporate vow of martyrdom. He makes more explicit what Le Fort leaves implied: the new prioress, Madame Lidoine, at first refuses Mother Marie's request to take the vow, noting that one cannot become a martyr voluntarily: it is a gift from God. Only when the nuns are imprisoned do they make this consecration, giving their lives as a witness to Christ.

Another key theme found in Bernanos's *Dialogues*—and absent in Le Fort's novella—is the subject of honor. The term honor is foundational for Bernanos's understanding of how one is both “Christian” and “modern.” He was well aware that honor was a bankrupt word, denoting a kind of snobbery and affectation, or worse, used to justify actions that serve to uphold a person's or a family's prestige and privilege. But for Bernanos “Christian honor” is “the fusion of human honor and the charity of Christ.”¹⁶ Honor becomes the

form of a Christian's interior mettle, the noble-mindedness and undaunted boldness of the human spirit identifying with Christ. Inherent in this notion is thus a humility not perverted into some form of acquiescence but one that actively responds to the world's selfishness and despair, a humility that overturns the world's values the way Christ did—the disdain for power, the exaltation of poverty, the dignity rendered from service to the weak. Bernanos believed that honor was the temporal response of service to Christ and the standard by which one's faith is judged.

More specifically, Bernanos understands honor as a kind of pride in being able to love as boldly and passionately as Christ did, whether it is for the poor, the weak, the widow, the orphan, or the forsaken. Martyrdom presupposes this certain boldness, this *joie de vivre*, what Bernanos called “that violent and jealous gusto for life that is just the stuff out of which martyrs are made.”¹⁷ It was to illustrate this boldness that Bernanos develops Sister Constance into a more rounded character in the *Dialogues*, making her into an individual who finds everything amusing and even knows how to cheer up her sisters in their prison on the eve of climbing to the guillotine. Her childlike innocence and bold proclamations give her an earthly happiness that fortifies those around her. And there is the moment in the *Dialogues* when Mother Marie takes on an almost prideful, arrogant tone when confronting the commissioner of the Republic: “Well Sir, you must know that to the poorest daughter of Carmel, *honor* speaks louder than fear.”¹⁸

Bernanos frequently complained that nothing annoyed him more than confusing the humility that comes with honor for any sort of political or moral defeatism. He refused to lay the mantle of Christian humility on the shoulders of the Vichy government's capitulation to Germany. In fact, he seemed to welcome France's disgrace as it collapsed before Hitler's onslaught as a step in the direction of purification. One can thus interpret his *Dialogues* as a drama of national expiation—a drama of the endured suffering of France's “dark night of the soul,” one that goes from the Reign of Terror in which

these women were sacrificed, all the way through the disasters of the Vichy government during World War II. For the Catholic Bernanos, his rendering of the martyrs of Compiègne is meant to illustrate what a truly *Christian* and *French* Revolution is: a new generation participating again in the task of Christ's passion.

The *Dialogues* was Bernanos's last work. Exhausted by the effort, he completed the project on April 8, 1948, with the final "dialogue" between the Carmelite chaplain and Mother Marie of the Incarnation, she who has instigated the vow of martyrdom but fears that her spiritual daughters will lose their courage without her presence. Mother Marie's final sacrifice of honor is a final glimpse of Bernanos's understanding of being a Christian: even Christian honor has to be let go like everything else, surrendered to God's designs. In the words of the first prioress who suffers an agonizing death early in the drama, "Remember that in every circumstance your honor is in the care of God. God has taken your honor in custody, and it is safer in His hands than in yours."¹⁹ These lines echo through the last line of the *Dialogues* as the chaplain admonishes Mother Marie to let go and, instead of regretting her absence from heroic martyrdom, to "think only of another gaze on which you should fix your eyes."²⁰ Bernanos's biographers note that after writing these words he literally took to his sick bed. His illness grew worse and he was flown to the American Hospital in Paris to confront his own death. His final words were recorded to be: "I am caught up in the Holy Agony. It is now between the two of us."²¹

Francis Poulenc

Francis Poulenc, born in 1899, is very different in temperament and style from Bernanos. Indeed, Poulenc represents even more the religious and artistic paradoxes of French Catholicism during this period. Many commentators refer to his split personality as part monk, part rogue. Like Bernanos's attempt to disturb the complacency and mediocrity of French society, so too did Poulenc want

his music to shock the bourgeoisie out of their tranquility and offer something cleaner and brighter, less disposed to sentiment, and yet a music that would communicate to his audience. Very much a part of the early avant-garde musical world and an early member of “Les Six,” a group of young French composers who gathered around Erik Satie in the 1920s, he disdained the lush impressionist styles of Claude Debussy and the overwrought romanticism of Richard Strauss and Richard Wagner for a style that mimicked the neo-classical styles of modernist composers. His earliest works show precociousness in their drive to surprise as well as to entertain, an ironic blending of often austere musical sequences with the fun of the popular French dance-hall song.²²

In 1936, traumatized by the death of a friend from a car crash, Poulenc’s Catholic faith reawakened, and he felt more and more drawn to the liturgy and to sacred music. This renewed religious faith and energy grew, despite the competing realities of his open homosexuality and what might be today diagnosed as a form of manic depression. In the midst of these tensions, Poulenc came to write a series of sacred works that expressed his deep Catholic faith. The first musical result of his reconversion was his *Litanies à la Vierge Noire* in 1936. Other masterpieces followed: *Salve Regina* (1941), *Stabat Mater* (1950), *Dialogues of the Carmelites* (1953–56), and *Gloria in G Major* (1959). Recalling Ellis Hanson’s argument that Catholicism and its cultural, aesthetic heritage has the ability to hold the paradoxes of human experience together—a faith tradition that is at once modern and medieval, ascetic and sumptuous, spiritual and sensual, chaste and erotic, homophobic and yet homoerotic—it might be said that Poulenc represents this creative paradox in his very person. As one of France’s great twentieth-century religious composers, he attended Mass, sometimes daily, and yet was very open about his homosexuality and the many loves of his life. He was an avant-garde artist whose music takes the medieval intentions of Catholic liturgical music and transfigures them in a modern caste. He was a man whose music never strove for the extraordinary or

the monumental (like a Beethoven or Wagner) but is rather content with and appreciative of the ordinary music of modern life. As a composer of sacred music, he reveals in his diaries that several of his major works, including *Dialogues*, were inspired by the deeply emotional and spiritual struggles he had with his friends and lovers.

Claude Gendre's detailed research on Poulenc's struggle to write this opera shows that the composer's obsession with Bernanos's text made this work one of his greatest achievements. In an interview for *Opéra de Paris* Poulenc noted that he had wanted to write an opera on a religious subject and had read Bernanos's *Dialogues* with fascination, but was uncertain about an opera without any romantic appeal. While walking in Rome he saw the *Dialogues* in a bookstore and took it as a divine sign: "I can see myself in a café in the Piazza Navone, on a bright morning in March of 1953, devouring Bernanos's drama and telling myself at the end of each scene, 'But obviously, it's made for me! It's made for me!'" He notes in the same interview that "those who are surprised by my collaboration with Bernanos do not really know me. His conception of the spiritual is exactly my own and his violent side is in perfect accord with a whole side of my nature, be it in pleasure or in asceticism."²³

Poulenc spent much of the remaining spring and summer editing Bernanos's text down to a manageable libretto. He kept about one third of it (825 of the 2,619 lines) and divided the opera into three acts. Aware that this would be his most ambitious work, he took three years to complete it. Reading his correspondence during the writing of the opera, one sees how Poulenc's enthusiasm for Bernanos's text is wedded to his own deepening spirituality. In late August 1953, still in the early stages of composition, Poulenc writes to his friend, the French baritone Pierre Bernac: "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."²⁴ In a letter to another friend two weeks later, he exclaims, "I am crazy about my subject, to the point of believing that I have actually known these women of Carmel."²⁵

Complaining to another about the spiritual struggle he is undergoing, he writes, “Sanctity is difficult enough but sacred music of the *Carmélites*’ kind is terrifying. I go through alternating states of satisfaction and despondency, for if this opera fails, it will fail dismally.”²⁶ And in October, just three months into the composition, he writes to another, “Either [this opera is] my masterpiece, or else I want to die. For the moment I’m inclined towards the former.”²⁷

Poulenc continued to compose the opera in the midst of his tormented love for Lucien Roubert, a man with whom he had been involved for many years. As their relationship deteriorated in the early part of 1954, Poulenc felt unmoored and wondered whether he could finish composing the opera. He complained to friends of physical health problems but was in fact undergoing a nervous breakdown, filled with doubts over Roubert’s feelings for him. For over four months, April through August 1954, Poulenc could not compose, telling Pierre Bernac of his “consuming love for Lucien,” and the creative and spiritual toll it was taking on him.²⁸ In a confessional moment, Poulenc’s Catholic faith becomes the means by which he deals with such torment. He writes to friends, “Alas, I am no longer master of my will, of my poor nerves. I am adrift. It is mortifying. Unfortunately, the only thing that will blot out [Lucien’s] face is another face. . . . May that of Christ’s enlighten me one day.”²⁹ Poulenc took comfort that in the midst of his estrangement from Lucien and his inability to work on the composition, he was receiving spiritual help from the Carmelite order. In July of that terrible summer, he received a letter from an American Carmelite, Father Griffin, promising him the community’s prayers:

I hasten to assure you that not only the Carmelite fathers of Dallas, but all the Carmelites in the United States—Fathers, Sisters and Brothers—are beginning a novena for you this week. One of our number who is blind, has learned only two days ago that he will henceforth be paralyzed in both legs. He was wondering for what intention he could offer this sacrifice

and suddenly it appears right in front of him! He rejoices now to be able to offer it for so great an intention: specifically that God relieve your heart and body so that you may musically glorify the blessed martyrs of Compiègne.³⁰

In February 1955, the situation between Poulenc and Roubert changed: Lucien was diagnosed with cancer and, from that moment on, Poulenc had him hospitalized and took care of him. Reconciliation was now definite between the two men, and the opera was again moving along and nearing completion. Poulenc writes to Pierre Bernac in August 1955,

I have entrusted Lucien 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 1953. After all the torment, 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' phrase, "We do not die for ourselves alone . . . but for, or instead of, each other." . . . Lucien is certainly the secret of *Les Carmélites*.³¹

In a letter dated 27 September 1955, Poulenc writes to the Carmelites of Compiègne, asking the nuns to pray for Lucien:

I take the liberty of writing to you because I believe that you are not unaware of the fact that I have just completed an opera based on Bernanos' *Dialogues of the Carmelites*. After many problems of health and other kinds, I have been able to complete this work to the glory of your order, at least I hope it to be so. I am grateful to Providence and especially for the protection of the Blessed Carmelites of Compiègne. Today it is their intercession that I ask you to implore through the voice of your sisters, for a friend, incurably ill, who is dying. This friend has always been passionately interested in my work which, alas, he will never see staged. I thought that you

would not find my request indiscreet and that is why, Reverend Mother, I dare hope that you will grant it.

Under his signature, Poulenc writes, “The name of my sick friend, a fervent Catholic, is Lucien Roubert.”³² Roubert died at the age of forty-seven, just as the final copies of the opera were completed. Poulenc wrote to his friend Simone Girard a month after Roubert’s death about its significance to composing the work: “The final copy of *Les Carmélites* was complete (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?”³³

Poulenc affirmed on many occasions that “these ladies of Compiègne” were part of his own spiritual development. 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. Poulenc told friends many times, “Blanche c’était moi.” In Roubert’s life and death, Poulenc felt he had understood Bernanos’s mystical insight—that we do not die for ourselves but die for and in the place of others. All this is played out in the profoundly tragic yet spiritual exaltation that ends the opera—the power and the glory is paradoxically gained as each voice is silenced by the guillotine. It is one of the most compelling moments in the history of opera.

Poulenc was able to honor Bernanos’s lifelong concerns: the spirit of childhood, the fear of abandonment by God, the Agony of Christ, the agony of our own Christian death, the nature of religious vocation and honor. The opera allows history to be reimagined as the adventure of salvation. Together these great artists tell the story of souls—Blanche, who finds salvation in accepting the Cross; Constance, who is the incarnation of spiritual youth; the Prioress, who

represents solitude and anguish before death; and the nuns of Carmel as a modern communion of saints, whose song at the scaffold becomes an exaltation of the life hidden underneath the surface, of grace perfecting nature, of bereavement and expiation made into a grand liturgy of atonement and self-sacrifice.

Poulenc knew of his debt to Bernanos, noting that “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.” Poulenc had absorbed the central insights of the twentieth-century French Catholic revival by steeping himself in Bernanos’s theological vision. It was not only that Poulenc served to amplify Blanche’s fear to a world audience still reeling from the disasters of World War II, but he gave voice to what he called “the utterly Bernanosian idea of the Communion of Saints and of the transfer of grace.”³⁴ Poulenc’s collaboration with Bernanos led him to experience for himself these ideas. In the voice of Sister Constance, he found the paradox of his faith revealed: “We do not die for ourselves alone, but for, or instead of, each other.”

Notes

1. Claude Gendre, “Dialogues des Carmélites: the Historical Background, Literary Destiny and Genesis of the Opera,” *Francis Poulenc: Music, Art and Literature*, trans. William Bush (London: Ashgate, 1999), 276. Much of the history and documentation provided in this essay about Poulenc’s opera comes from Gendre’s brilliant, extensive essay, where he quotes from the French national archives, the archives of Stanbrook Abbey, as well as from William Bush’s work, *Marie de l’Incarnation: La Relation du martyre des seize Carmélites de Compiègne* (Paris: Cerf, 1993). The best history of the Carmelites in English is Bush’s *To Quell the Terror: The Mystery of the Vocation of the Sixteen Carmelites of Compiègne Guillotined July 17, 1794* (New York: ICS Books, 1999).
2. On the same day that the Carmelites were sentenced to death, the Benedictine nuns back in Compiègne, still wearing their forbidden religious habits, were ordered to put on the civilian clothes left by the Carmelites nuns. When news of the Carmelites’ executions reached them the next day, they considered the new clothes they were wearing to be the relics of martyrs, and they had them housed at Stanbrook Abbey on their return to England.

3. Works inspired by this historical event include Gertrud von Le Fort's novella, *Die Letzte am Schafott* (1931) [translated into English by Olga Marx as *The Song at the Scaffold* in 1933]; Emmet Lavery's drama of the same name, *The Song at the Scaffold* (1949); Philippe Agostini and Raymond-Léopold Bruckberger's film *Le Dialogue des Carmélites* (1960) based on Bernanos's dramatic treatment. The invention of the Carmelite novice Blanche de la Force in Gertrude von Le Fort's novella was retained by everyone who adapted her work, including Bernanos.
4. Of course, the terms "modern," "modernist," and "modernism" are ambiguous words in contemporary discourse, often used without precision and at cross-purposes. There is a great slippage of meaning, for instance, between the historiographical marking of the "modern era," the "modernist controversy" in Roman Catholic theology (from the *Syllabus of Errors* in 1864 to the antimodernist oath for theologians promulgated in *Pascendi dominici gregis* in 1907), to the literary "High Modernism" of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (1922) and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1925). For the purposes of this article, I am following Stephen Schloesser's use of the term in its functional role in historical discourse as "the binary opposite of tradition . . . a concept used to denote (by contrast) other discourses as being 'not modern' or 'anti-modern'—and hence, devalued as being irrational, childish, primitive, or antiquarian." Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystical Modernism in Postwar Paris, 1919–1933* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 11.
5. Quoted in *ibid.*, 3.
6. Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 7.
7. Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism*, 8. Much of my summation is taken from Schloesser's own argument, see 4–17.
8. *Ibid.*, 7.
9. *Ibid.*, 7. The substance of Schloesser's argument is his investigation of a new Catholic synthesis in the works of philosopher Jacques Maritain, painter Georges Rouault, novelist Georges Bernanos, and composer Charles Tournemire.
10. Schloesser notes three Catholic ideas or doctrines that are reconceptualized in the interwar years: hylomorphism (a Thomistic interpretation of Aristotelian cosmology), sacramentalism, and transubstantiation. For the purposes of this article, I consider Schloesser's notion of sacramentalism as the most helpful and offer a possible fourth idea that is essential to understanding *Dialogues*: Catholic atonement theology.
11. Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism*, 8.
12. Letter to Pierre Bernac, 19 August 1955. Quoted in Gendre, "Dialogues," 306.
13. Gertrude von Le Fort, as told in her 1958 memoir, quoted in *ibid.*, 279. Le Fort was inspired to write the novella by chance: she was reading a book about Catholic religious orders when she came across the sixteen Carmelites of Compiègne. At the bottom of the page was a note that related how the Carmelites were heard singing as they went to the scaffold.
14. Gertrude von Le Fort, *The Song at the Scaffold*, 76.

15. Madame Armelle Guerne, 11 July 1960. Quoted in Gendre, "Dialogues," 284.
16. Georges Bernanos, *Les Grands Cimetières Sous la Lune*, trans. by Pamela Morris as *A Diary of My Times* (Paris: Grasset, 1938), 356.
17. Georges Bernanos, *La Grande Peur des Bien-Pensants* (Paris: Grasset, 1931), 277. In this text (translated as *The Great Fear of Right-thinking People*) Bernanos attacks the French middle class for their complacency and mediocrity toward faith and life.
18. Georges Bernanos, *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, trans. Michael Legat, repub. in *The Heroic Face of Innocence: Three Stories by Georges Bernanos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 98.
19. *Ibid.*, 74.
20. *Ibid.*, 149.
21. Gendre, "Dialogues," 286.
22. Much of this assessment of Poulenc comes from Benjamin Ivry's *Francis Poulenc* (20th Century Composers Series), Phaidon Press, 1996.
23. Poulenc, "Comment j'ai composé les *Dialogues des Carmélites*," in *Opéra de Paris*, 14, 1957. Quoted in Gendre, "Dialogues," 294. The letters herein quoted are all taken from Gendre's lengthy essay that charts the progress of the opera's composition.
24. Letter to Pierre Bernac, 22 August 1953 (*ibid.*, 295).
25. Letter to Stéphane Audel, 31 August 1953 (*ibid.*).
26. Letter to Yvonne Gouverné, 24 September 1953 (*ibid.*, 297).
27. Letter to Henri Hell, 12 October 1953 (*ibid.*).
28. Letter to Pierre Bernac, 28 July 1954 (*ibid.*, 300).
29. Letter to Simone and Pierre Girard, October 1954 (*ibid.*, 303).
30. Letter from Fr. Griffin to Francis Poulenc, July 1954 (*ibid.*, 301).
31. Letter to Pierre Bernac, 19 August 1955 (*ibid.*, 306).
32. From an unpublished letter obtained from the archivist of the Carmel of Compiègne. Quoted in *ibid.*, 306–7.
33. Letter to Simone Girard, 31 October 1955 (*ibid.*, 307).
34. Poulenc, in *Cahiers de l'Herne* (1961), 160. Quoted in *ibid.*, 310.