Self-Sacrifice between Constraint and Redemption: Gertrud von Le Fort’s The Song at the Scaffold

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1 Introduction

Converts to Catholicism cherish certain books in which a passionate religious fervor goes along with a highly individual orientation. At first glance this personal experience seems to be characterized by a thoroughly orthodox orientation, but on closer scrutiny the borders of institutionalized Catholic religion are often transcended from the very moment of entering into the holy Mother Church. Next to the Confessions of Saint Augustine, Die Letzte am Schafott [The song at the scaffold], by Gertrud von le Fort (1876–1971), a convert herself, belongs to the favorite conversion literature.

It would be easy to dismiss the theme of this book, Die Letzte am Schafott, as no more than an expression of a Catholic triumphant attitude. During the French revolution, possessions of convents were confiscated and whoever resisted was sentenced to death and executed under the guillotine. The French Revolution would be no more than a demonstration of the barbarous attitude of the idolatry of Reason over against the devotion to true faith. The story, however, goes far deeper than that. This becomes clear when we focus on two of the main characters: Two young girls, strongly differing in temperament and background; and two spiritual leaders in the convent diametrically opposed to one another. We will note that the story contains a sharp criticism of traditional Catholic ideas about self-sacrifice and martyrdom. Simultaneously, the story offers a passionate picture of true martyrdom, which can only be reached by acknowledging existential fear and a deep love of life.

1.1 Bringing a Sacrifice Willingly and without Struggle is not a Sacrifice

First I want to clarify in which way the story of the Carmelites can be connected to the story of Abraham called upon to sacrifice his own son, as told in Qur’an and Bible, with or without elaboration in the midrash, the Jewish interpretations of the Bible. The primary message of the story is that the sacrifice of the son is initially commanded, but should not be executed eventually. God demands surrender from Abraham, but not at the expense of his own son. Full humanity can go together with full surrender to God, as the story could be
summarized. Abraham’s awakening conscience during the story would convey precisely this insight.

It is, however, vital to realize the paradoxical character of the sacrificial act. Some interpretations depict Abraham as a real paragon of obedience, to such an extent that it almost seems as if it were his only wish to sacrifice his son. This would totally rob the sacrifice of its dynamism! Suppose Abraham was secretly thinking: “Thank heavens, I cannot wait to sacrifice my son”.1 This would give us a shudder of abhorrence. Apparently, a sacrifice can only retain its significance as sacrifice when it is actually too precious to be made. The willingness to sacrifice to God might nearly obscure this essential fact. Only when the sacrifice is as precious as one’s own life – or even more – devotion to God can have a meaning. This implies that no sacrifice made out of hatred of life and out of contempt of oneself can be regarded as a sacrifice.

Hence, the sacrifice affirms in a paradoxical way the very human desire to retain the sacrifice. Asceticism, fasting, and other transformations of sacrifice retain their significance only as affirmation of love for life, of enjoyment of human existence, expressed in eating and drinking and in sexuality. The rest is nothing but self-mutilation and a not outgrown asceticism. Even celibacy and sexual abstinence need to affirm bodily affections as of great value, or rather they would serve as a foil for the hatred of life and the body.

Let us now turn to the story of the Carmelites. Although it has a historical kernel, it became famous as a novel, as a film script by George Bernanos, and as an opera by Francis Poulenc, *Dialogues des Carmélites.*

2 Die Letzte am Schafott2

This is historical: Carmelite sisters resist the confiscation of their convent during the French revolution. Sixteen sisters are condemned to death. In 1906, these sisters have been beatified. Gertrud von le Fort wrote her novel, *Die Letzte*

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1 A variety of sources such as the well-known painting by Rembrandt of Abraham sacrificing Isaac (in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg) as well as a Syriac dialogue poem about Genesis 22 allude to a certain cruelty in Abraham without, however, pushing it so far as to rob the sacrifice of its meaning. See S. Brock, “Two Syriac Verse Homilies on the Binding of Isaac,” in *Le Muséon* 99 (1986), 61–129. A psychoanalytical interpretation of the story as the struggle between father and son also tends to assume a certain willingness in Abraham to sacrifice.