Character Interpretation in Poulenc's La Voix Humaine: A Performer's Guide

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CHARACTER INTERPRETATION IN POULENC’S LA VOIX HUMAINE:

A PERFORMER’S GUIDE

by

Stefanie Nicole Anduri

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
and the School of Music
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

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ABSTRACT

CHARACTER INTERPRETATION IN POULENC’S LA VOIX HUMAINE: A PERFORMER’S GUIDE

by Stefanie Nicole Anduri

December 2016

Francis Poulenc’s 1959 opera, La Voix humaine provides uncommon opportunities for divergent character interpretations and unique challenges to the performer. The opera chronicles the final telephone conversation between the sole character and her estranged lover. The opera’s format is unprecedented; because the audience does not hear Monsieur’s responses, the performer must create and portray them through her reactions, a challenge unique to this work. Through the exploration of four distinct characterizations, I discuss the choices and ramifications for the woman’s demeanor towards other people on the telephone line, her relationship with the man, the function of the various musical motives employed throughout the opera, and her fate at the end of the opera, offering performers of the opera various interpretations from which to choose, and adding depth and insight to Madame’s character. I examine the libretto, musical motives, and various other musical elements to develop the characterizations. I consult and apply information from several extra-musical sources, including historical, psychological, medical sources, and the play on which the opera is based. I also include two appendices: an interview with sopranos Emily Hindrichs and Camille Zamora, both of whom have performed the opera multiple times, and an idiomatic translation of the libretto.
There are limitless possibilities in the interpretation of this role; it is my hope that this document will offer creative insight and inspiration for anyone who endeavors to sing this role.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Maryann Kyle for her tireless assistance, encouragement, and guidance throughout the dissertation process, Emily Hindrichs and Camille Zamora for their artistic insight, Messieurs Francis Poulenc and Cocteau for the creation of this incredible opera, and Madame Denise Duval for bringing the character to life.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my beautiful husband, Graham, and sons, Leo and Max, without whose patience and unyielding support, this accomplishment would not be possible. I love you every day, no matter what!

And to the memories of Monsieur Poulenc and Madame Duval; I feel honored to have gotten to know you both through my research, and I thank you for your eternal souls, which you bestowed upon the world through your art. How fortunate we are that you both shared your gifts with the world!
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CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

Francis Poulenc’s 1959 opera, *La Voix humaine* is a mono-opera\(^1\) based on the play of the same name by Jean Cocteau. *La Voix humaine* provides uncommon opportunities for divergent character interpretations and unique challenges to the performer. The opera’s plot is wrought with the emotional turmoil of lost love. A woman, called only *Madame* throughout the score, engages in a final phone call with her estranged lover, known as *Monsieur*. The audience neither sees nor hears him, but depending on the choice of staging, inflection, expression and word stress that inform Madame’s responses and demeanor, audience members can glean insight into the nature of the relationship and subsequent separation from the standpoint of the central character. The opera’s format is unprecedented; because the audience does not hear Monsieur’s responses, the performer must create and portray them through her reactions, a challenge unique to this work.

In order to portray both Madame’s and Monsieur’s characters, is also crucial to consider the woman’s state of mind throughout the opera. If she is chronically depressed, it might inform the performance differently than if she is simply driven to despair over the loss of her dear love. The variability of dramatic choices lasts throughout the opera, as Madame’s final fate is unclear: in some productions, she takes her own life, using inspiration from a number of items in her apartment as indicated by the score: for example, Madame divulges that she attempted to end her life the previous evening by overdosing on sleeping pills, later in the opera, she flippantly tells him that she has no

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\(^1\) An opera with a cast of one.
plans to purchase a revolver, and near the end of the opera, she hints at strangling or suffocating herself using the telephone cord, finally revealing that she has wrapped the cord around her neck in an effort to feel his voice surrounding her. The ambiguity of the backstory creates myriad possibilities for interpretive freedoms, and the opera can be construed in varying ways, depending on the singer’s understanding of the main character and her relationship with Monsieur. Through the exploration of four distinct characterizations, I will discuss the choices and ramifications for her demeanor towards other people on the telephone line, her relationship with Monsieur, the function of the various musical motives employed throughout the opera, and her fate at the end of the opera, offering performers of the opera various interpretations from which to choose, and adding depth and insight to Madame’s character. In the first of these scenarios, Madame’s character is based closely on omitted material from Cocteau’s play, in the second, Madame is addicted to the sleeping pills mentioned in the score, in the third, Monsieur has been abusive toward Madame throughout their relationship, and in the fourth and final scenario, the break up is sudden and unforeseen by Madame. These scenarios are listed in no particular order, as they each offer equally valid and unique approaches to Madame’s character.

Soprano Emily Hindrichs describes the challenge of interpreting Madame’s character and the great opportunity for variance in the interpretation of the role:

We had to decide how dark and manipulative Elle was going to be. Was she already down the rabbit hole, making one last ditch effort to pull her man in with her? Or was she trying to grasp for a handhold to pull herself out? The "empty moments" where her lover responds gave us a lot of liberty to determine the nature of their relationship. Was he an older man, discarding a young trophy, or
was it a relationship that had begun in youth/adolescence that he'd outgrown? So many choices!  

La Voix Humaine

The couple’s final telephone call takes place shortly after they have separated at the end of a five-year relationship. The conversation is frequently interrupted by crossed lines and wrong numbers, a symptom of Paris’s poor party line telephone system.  

At the beginning of the exchange, Madame seems upbeat and strong, but as the plot wears on, Madame reveals that she was so distraught over the loss of the relationship, that she attempted suicide the previous evening. Though he seemingly tries to comfort her as evidenced by her replies, her hopes of rekindling their love are quashed, as he will be leaving town immediately, presumably with his new lover, who is indicated, but not expressly mentioned in the score. Madame ends the opera by repeating the phrase “I love you” several times into a vacant receiver.

The absence of the partner’s responses provides an opportunity for dramatic freedom to create any dynamic Madame chooses. The colloquial and informal libretto makes Madame seem relatable, allowing for a realistic portrayal of human emotion in a way that composers of Verismo operas strove to achieve, but rarely accomplished. The emotionally precise musical language, often found in the musical motives that reflect Madame’s sentiments, enhances the verisimilitude of an already realistic situation. Madame’s suffering is honest and convincing. It is dramatic, but not beyond imagination, unlike the exaggerated emotional portrayal of Expressionist characters.

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2 Emily Hindrichs. Interviewed by Stefanie Anduri. E-mail interview. March 13, 2015.

3 Party line: A telephone line shared by multiple households
Poulenc’s brilliant setting of Jean Cocteau’s libretto grants the performer the opportunity to portray Madame’s anguish in a way that audiences can feel, and likely have experienced. It is neither haughty nor poetic. It is simple and authentic. Hindrichs describes the verisimilitude of Madame’s character by saying “Elle is...a flesh-and-blood young woman. Sometimes, opera characters can be a little too polished – too good and virtuous, too evil and base – it’s rare one can play someone who is both tender and manipulative, vulnerable and proud.” Miss Hindrichs’s description sheds light on the realism of Madame’s character. Humans experience a wide variety of emotions and reactions; we are not static creatures. Miss Hindrich’s sentiment is echoed by soprano Camille Zamora:

At the start of the work, and with every new ring of the phone, Elle has hope; I think this must be conveyed. Sure, she is exhausted and has moments of hysterical desperation and terror, but also has wit, spirit, and humor. She can’t be played (as is sometimes a “default setting” with this work) as a purely hysterical, victimized creature. Elle is sexy, vibrant, proud, and very much alive, and we have to bring out those strands in the work when Poulenc/Cocteau offer it to us.

The widely varied nature of Madame’s character allows for great interpretive freedom. A dynamic portrayal of Madame’s character lends to her realism.

Dramatically, the work is uncommon; Madame must portray a passionate, often agitated and frantic character based on replies from a silent, invisible partner on the other end of the telephone line. A similar situation is presented in Arnold Schönberg’s Erwartung, a mono-opera in which the sole character discovers and unburdens herself to

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4 Though the character is only called “Madame” in the score, she is sometimes referred to as “Elle,” meaning “she” when the role is being discussed.
5 Emily Hindrichs. E-mail interview.
6 Camille Zamora. Interviewed by Stefanie Anduri. E-mail interview. March 28, 2015.
the body of her deceased lover. However, in Schönberg’s work, the silent partner is truly silent; there are no responses implied or otherwise.\(^7\) Poulenc’s heroine, called only Madame in the score, must portray her own character, but she must also find a way to show reactions that indicate the responses of her estranged lover, Monsieur. She must imagine his replies and convey them to an audience using an inanimate object, the telephone, as the sole tool connecting them, and simultaneously disconnecting them.

Philosopher Avital Ronell describes the telephone as “a machine that connects the voices of disconnected beings – in its power to reseparate voices, the telephone only temporarily connects voices.”\(^8\) In Poulenc’s opera, the telephone serves to alleviate the man’s responsibility for having broken Madame’s heart. The separation provided by the telephone allows him to end their relationship with peace, knowing the he will not need to participate in Madame’s emotional turmoil as she navigates the difficulties of her new, solitary life.

The telephone connection as indicated by Poulenc in the score is a weak one, often interrupted by crossed lines or disconnections, which can be viewed as mimicking the couple’s broken relationship. The detachment inherent in the telephone conversation serves both to extricate Madame and Monsieur from an emotionally charged face-to-face final farewell, and to allow Madame a disguise, hiding her emotional instability until she is ready to reveal it. It also allows Monsieur an easy emancipation from the relationship, as Madame is left alone to wallow in her grief. An early review of the telephone in an

1887 edition of *The Scientific American* describes the strange new invention, and the uneasiness that accompanied its existence:

…the mysteriousness, the sense of material non-existence, of that part of the machine and its belongings that lies beyond one’s own instrument… I can imagine my friend at the other end of the line. But between us two there is an airy nowhere, inhabited by voices and nothing else – Helloland, I should call it. The vocal inhabitants of this strange region have an amazing vanishing quality… The consciousness of such an experience produces in sensitive men, I am sure, a sensation of nervous shock, somewhat akin to seasickness. And sometimes…you hear the confused murmur of a hundred voices. You catch more expressions from private conversations than your nerves can transmit to the central office of your brain; and if you are imaginative, you may undergo, as I have, a feeling as if you had a hundred astral bodies that were guiltily listening at as many keyholes…The telephone seems to you to have no visible agency…Your applications and complaints go over the wire to that one impersonal, impalpable voice.\(^9\)

This sentiment expressed in the *Scientific American* is brought to life in Poulenc’s opera. No matter how Madame tries to appeal to Monsieur, he is unable to be swayed; the telephone allows him to maintain his distance from the woman about whom he once cared, and from whom he is now trying to flee. The two become separate beings who were once united by passion, and who are now only tied by a flimsy telephone connection.

### Phases

The opera is not divided into separate acts or scenes, but rather exists as a single, continuous unit. However, the topic of conversation shifts frequently, giving structure to the work and dividing it into seventeen distinct sections, or “phases.”\(^{10}\) The phases are responsible for much of the fragmentary nature of the opera, distinguishing Madame’s

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\(^{10}\) Sydney Buckland and Myriam Chimènes, *Francis Poulenc: Music, Art, and Literature*. (Singapore: Ashgate, 1999), 325.
emotional fluctuations throughout the piece. The phases allow for a seemingly organic and improvisatory performance, creating an impression of surprise as the music shifts drastically without warning, and allowing Madame’s responses to appear unexpected and spontaneous.

The first phase, called “Telephone Problems (First Time),”\textsuperscript{11} begins immediately after the 18-measure orchestral introduction. Madame’s frustration in this phase is compounded by a series of crossed lines which prevent Madame from connecting with Monsieur.\textsuperscript{12}

During the second phase, named the “controlled pain phase,” Madame and Monsieur have finally connected. In an effort to appear strong, Madame tells Monsieur a series of lies regarding her state of being since the break up, making it seem as though she is thriving without him.\textsuperscript{13}

Poulenc titled the third phase “First Signs of Frayed Nerves.” For the first time, the audience is able to sense that Monsieur suspects Madame’s dishonesty. Though she tries to assure him that she is incapable of lying to him, Monsieur accuses Madame of hiding concealing the truth.\textsuperscript{14}

In the fourth phase, “Rememberance of Past Happiness,” Madame evokes memories of the relationship’s beginning, possibly in an attempt to sway Monsieur’s heart back to her.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{11} Poulenc named the phases.  
\textsuperscript{12} Buckland, 325.  
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 326
The fifth phase, called “Return to the Present” firmly reveals for the first time that the couple has separated. Though the audience is led to believe that the couple is no longer together, it is not until the two begin making plans for Monsieur to fetch his belongings from Madame’s apartment that the audience knows for certain.\footnote{Buckland, 326.}

The next phase is brief. Poulenc called this sixth phase “Telephone Problems (Second Time).” The connection is nearly lost, but it eventually stabilizes, and the conversation continues.\footnote{Ibid.}

In the seventh phase, called “Easing the Tension,” Madame flirts with Monsieur, accurately guessing what he is wearing and what he is doing. Her flirting turns into a revelation of her despair, and she foreshadows her own death, calling the telephone “a weapon which leaves no trace and makes no sound.”\footnote{Poulenc, \textit{La Voix}, 25.} \footnote{Buckland, 326.}

During the eighth phase, called “Telephone Problems (Third Time),” the pair is disconnected. Frantically, Madame begs the operator to redial the number. After a failed attempt, Madame is connected with the extension.\footnote{Ibid.}

The ninth phase reveals that Monsieur is not at home, and that he lied to Madame about his whereabouts. Poulenc named this phase “Realization of His Lie.” When Monsieur’s concierge exposes that Monsieur is out for the evening, Madame realizes that he must be with a new lover. She is devastated and stupefied.\footnote{Ibid.}
The tenth phase is the longest of the opera. It is during this “Truth Phase” that Madame reveals her suffering to Monsieur, sharing that she attempted suicide the previous night, and that she was weak without him. She describes her drug overdose, but also assures him (half-heartedly) that she is strong and that she will recover from the loss.\textsuperscript{22}

The eleventh phase is called “Paroxysm of Suffering.” Madame lashes out when she hears music playing through Monsieur’s phone. She knows his new lover must be playing the music, but he tries to calm her by fabricating that his neighbors are playing their gramophone loudly. Madame apologizes for her outburst and excuses herself for her rudeness, as the telephone is the final thread connecting her to him. \textsuperscript{23}

The twelfth phase, named the “Despondency Phase,” gives deeper insight into Madame’s suffering, as she describes just how troubled she has become. \textsuperscript{24}

The thirteenth phase is often omitted from performances of the opera. In this “Dog Phase,” the couple discusses what should become of their shared pet. The conversation is cut short when the line is interrupted by a neighbor during the fourteenth phase, “Telephone Problems (fourth time).” Monsieur is shaken by the neighbor’s rude comments, and Madame comes to his aid, convincing the neighbor to hang up the phone.\textsuperscript{25}

It is during the fifteenth phase, “Realization of Total Void,” that Madame first grasps the finality of this phone call with Monsieur. Though she mentions suicide again,

\textsuperscript{22} Buckland, 326.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 327.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
she feebly assures Monsieur that he need not worry, as she would not even know where
to buy a revolver, and no one ever commits suicide twice.\footnote{Buckland, 327.}

Despite her claim that she will be alright without him, in the penultimate phase,
named “Last Hope,” Madame tries desperately to sway Monsieur to admit his dishonesty.
He grows angry, and the two are disconnected again. He calls again, and Madame is unsuccessful in her further attempts to coerce him into admitting his deceit.\footnote{Ibid.}

In the final “Farewell Phase,” Madame learns that Monsieur will be traveling to
Marseille, presumably with his new lover. Madame begs him no to stay at the hotel they frequented when they were a couple. After he complies, and after another foreshadowed mention of suicide, Monsieur finally hangs up the phone as Madame cries “I love you” several times into a vacant receiver.\footnote{Ibid.}

Motives

Woven throughout the opera are eleven motives representative of Madame’s emotional state or an object, person, or idea that relates to the couple’s relationship. The motives are generally short, lasting only a few measures, and they range in number of repetitions, musical scope, and dramatic impact on the opera. At the beginning of the score, Poulenc leaves four instructions for performers and directors of the opera. One of these directs the singer to “pass suddenly from anguish to calm and vice versa.” Poulenc alternates the motives frequently in order to portray Madame’s emotional instability. Often, the text does not match the accompaniment, indicating the battle between her mind

\footnote{Buckland, 327.} \footnote{Ibid.} \footnote{Ibid.}
and her heart. Though Madame is trying to appear as calm as possible, the orchestra reveals that she is panicked at the belief that she will never be involved with Monsieur again. Camille Zamora discusses Poulenc’s use of musical motives, describing how Madame’s character is brought to life by the use of the composer’s thematic material:

Poulenc’s opera – through his recurring melodic motives and the freshness of his musical ideas overall – brings a multi-faceted quality to Elle that is not as clear in the play. It is through Poulenc’s melodies and harmonic structure, as much as through any of the words conveyed, that we learn who Elle is, and why her love is so intense and so true. 29

For Emily Hindrichs, the very use of motives informs the interpretation of the role, shedding light on Madame’s perseverance and emotional immaturity:

I identified and labeled the different motives with character motivations – stalling, flirting, trying to distract, seduce, recalling, fabricating, etc. The fact that Poulenc repeated some of these motives, to me, indicated that Elle was trying to direct the conversation a certain way, and employing a multitude of techniques to do so. This, in itself, indicated something about her character – she hadn’t given up hope, despite all her talk about understanding and accepting the situation. She was making every last play for her lover, and she wasn’t afraid to play dirty. I think it’s also important to show how rash she can be – the kind of impulsiveness that one would expect from someone younger. She can’t sound too wise, or it goes against the erratic nature of the music. 30

The motives are briefly described here, and will be examined in depth in the following chapters as they relate to each of the four character choices. With the exceptions of the “ties motive” and the “farewell motive,” which were named in Sidney Buckland and Myriam Chinènes’s book Francis Poulenc: Music, Art and Literature, 31 I labeled the motives by determining their repetitive and consistent underlying meanings.

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29 Camille Zamora. E-mail interview. March 28, 2015.
30 Emily Hindrichs. E-mail interview. March 13, 2015.
31 Buckland, 337.
The “fear motive” is the first to appear in the opera and it is presented four times over the course of the work (see Musical Example 1).

Musical Example 1 Fear motive

It opens *La voix humaine* with a dissonant melody and agitated rhythm. Poulenc instructed that it be played slowly and with anguish. A trilled F# adds harmonic tension to the melodic line and is sustained through the entire, seven-bar motive. The audience can feel Madame’s anxiety while the violin plays its shrill melody. This motive conveys the woman’s panic as she awaits Monsieur’s phone call or reacts unfavorably to something he has said.

The “mounting tension motive” first appears during the introduction at Rehearsal 1, measure 9. It is wrought with dissonance and uneven, dotted rhythms, and it occurs ten times throughout the course of the opera, signifying Madame’s ever-increasing anxiety as she impatiently awaits his phone call or response, or as she builds up courage to reveal information which she is nervous about sharing (see Musical Example 2).

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32 Poulenc, *La Voix*, 1
Musical Example 2 Mounting tension motive

The third motive, which I will call the “telephone ring motive,” is one of two motives not representative of Madame’s emotional state. This motive occurs each time Madame’s telephone rings, and is musically the simplest motive in the piece; the telephone’s ring is represented by a single note, repeated several times by a xylophone. The pitch and number of repeats of the note are variable. There is not a consistent correlation between the pitch of the telephone ring and Madame’s pitch or emotional state. In three of the seven repetitions of this motive, the pitch of the telephone ring motive is an octave higher than Madame’s entrance note, but at various points throughout the opera, the motive’s pitch is not closely related to the heroine’s next note: twice, the motive occurs a diminished twelfth (tri-tone) above Madame’s next pitch, once, the motive’s pitch occurs a minor ninth above the following sung pitch, and once, it occurs a minor tenth above Madame’s next entrance note. The duration of the telephone ring can be attributed to the length of time it takes Madame to pick up the receiver (see Musical Example 3).

33 Poulenc, La Voix, 1.
34 Ibid., 2.
36 Ibid., 3.
37 Poulenc, La Voix, 26.
Musical Example 3 Telephone ring motive

The fourth motive is the other motive that does not portray Madame’s emotional state. The “poor/wrong connection motive” occurs each time Madame and Monsieur’s telephone conversation is interrupted or prevented by the poor party line telephone system, as indicated by the score. Several times throughout the opera, Madame is faced with a wrong number, a crossed line, or a neighbor seeking to use the line on which Madame is speaking. Each time one of these poor/wrong connections occurs, the orchestra plays a broken diminished thirteenth chord composed of 32\textsuperscript{nd} notes and dotted eighth notes. This motive appears ten times over the course of the opera (see Musical Example 4).

Musical Example 4 Poor/Wrong Connection Motive

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23
The “casual conversation motive” is the fifth motive to appear in the score. This single-measure motive is legato and whimsical, reflecting the heroine’s composure (see Musical Example 8). It first appears as Madame and Monsieur are connected for the first time. Monsieur asks a series of questions, and after each, Madame simply answers “yes.” Because of the relaxed nature of Madame’s replies, it can be assumed that the two are exchanging pleasantries. Immediately following this segment, Madame begins her series of lies, detailing her recent return home after an exciting evening out.

Musical Example 5 Casual conversation motive

The sixth motive, which I call the “appearing calm motive,” occurs nineteen times throughout the score, more than any other motive. It appears each time Madame tries to conceal her agitated emotional state. It first appears at rehearsal 12, measure 68, as the heroine fabricates a story about the previous evening, lying to Monsieur about a fictitious outing with her friend Marthe. As she grasps to conjure details, the orchestral “appearing calm motive” repeats for seven measures under her. The motive is simple, and its pattern is strictly rhythmic, lending it great harmonic flexibility. The first

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38 Poulenc, *La Voix*, 4
presentation takes place in two-four time, and is characterized by a quarter note chord on each beat, and a single eighth note on the “and” of each beat (see Musical Example 6).

Musical Example 6 Appearing Calm Motive\textsuperscript{40} \textsuperscript{41}

The seventh motive, called the “lament motive,” is a two-measure lament bass in which the first measure is a chromatic descending bass line, and the second is a combination of ascending and descending chromatic single pitches (see Musical Example 7). This motive occurs seven times over the course of the opera, and each time it appears, Madame either contemplates the intensity of her grief or pouts in an effort to make Monsieur feel sorry for her, hoping that he will rekindle the relationship.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} Translation: \textit{I went to bed early, and since I couldn't fall asleep, I took a sleeping pill.}
The “happy memories motive” is the eighth motive to appear in the score. It is present each time Madame recalls a pleasant memory from the couple’s past, as she does in measure 155, rehearsal 26, remind Monsieur of the first day the two met on a Sunday afternoon on a tire swing at Versailles. As Madame reminisces, the sweeping, lyrical motive plays beneath her (see Musical Example 8). Her reminiscence of their meeting is one of few moments in the score in which the audience can sense Madame’s pleasure. This happiness is brief, as the conversation quickly shifts her divulgence of the ways she ruined the relationship, even from the very beginning.44

Musical Example 8 Happy memories motive45

The ninth motive, or “ties motive” appears each time there is mention of events, people, or objects that connect the two. It is the only motive that typically occurs both in

42 Poulenc, La Voix, 10.
43 Translations: The bag? Your letters and mine. You can come get them whenever you’d like.
44 Poulenc, La Voix, 13.
45 Ibid.
the vocal line and in the orchestra. It consists of two short phrases, the first of which is a single measure, and the second is two measures (see Musical Example 9). Each statement of this motive is met with apparent flippancy and emotional detachment from Madame.

Musical Example 9 Ties motive

The tenth motive occurs each time Madame calms herself after a rise in tension, and is frequent in the score; because of its soothing presence after a dramatic climax, this motive, which I will call the “deep breath motive” helps to create the frequent emotional peaks and valleys prevalent throughout the opera. It is a rhythmic motive, always in 4/4 time, where the first chord is a half note, and the second two chords are each quarter notes (see Musical Example 10). The rhythmic pattern occurs in differing numbers of repetitions in each instance, ranging from one statement to seven consecutive statements of the motive.

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The eleventh and final motive first appears near the opera’s end, at measure 712, rehearsal 100. This “farewell motive” is a chromatic, melodically unnerving theme that repeats and modulates several times in the 69 measures between the first instance and the end of the work (see Musical Example 11). The motive itself is two measures long but its statements are consecutive, so that it is repeated four times before its pattern is broken by the presence of different music. The four-statement sequence of the “farewell motive” occurs twice as Madame is preparing to end her final conversation with her love, and possibly forecasting her suicide.

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48 Poulenc, La Voix, 14.
49 Translation: Oh, no! Definitely not now. And you?
Musical Example 11 Farewell motive\textsuperscript{50} \textsuperscript{51}

Poulenc’s motives help direct the performer’s interpretation of the character.

Emily Hindrichs used the musical motives to guide her understanding of the role:

The fact that Poulenc repeated some of these motives, to me, indicated that Elle was trying to direct the conversation a certain way, and employing a multitude of techniques to do so. This, in itself, indicated something about her character – she hadn’t given up hope, despite all her talk about understanding and accepting the situation. \textsuperscript{52}

For Hindrichs, the very existence of repeated motives in the score revealed a facet of Madame’s character: she is not ready to give up on her lover, though she feigns strength and independence at several points throughout the opera.

\textsuperscript{50} Poulenc, \textit{La Voix}, 65

\textsuperscript{51} Translation: \textit{I know that we must, but it’s dreadful. I will never be strong enough.}

\textsuperscript{52} Hindrichs, Emily. E-mail interview. March 13, 2015.
SCENARIO 1: BASED ON COCTEAU

The first scenario, based closely on the omitted material from Cocteau’s play, is the most straight-forward. The Libretto from Poulenc’s work was taken directly from Cocteau’s script; Poulenc did not add any text himself, but he did omit several sections of the play. In this scenario, Monsieur has left Madame for another woman. Madame is heartbroken, as the two have spent five years in a mutually loving relationship, and she vacillates between maintaining her strength and pride, and allowing herself to wallow in her despair. Using this, the singer can conceive Madame as an approachable and relatable character, as she experiences the emotional peaks and valleys commonly experienced when ending a relationship. In order to portray this character, the singer would need to examine important scenes in Cocteau’s play that were omitted in Poulenc’s opera.

Poulenc’s first excluded passages occur in Cocteau’s stage direction, printed at the beginning of the script. While Poulenc kept some of these directions, he omitted the following portions shown in bold.

The stage, surrounded by red-painted frames and draperies, depict a woman’s room; a somber, bluish room: to the left, an unkempt bed, and to the right, a door ajar which leads to a white, illumined bathroom. **In the center, on a partition, is a lop-sided, enlarged image of some masterpiece or a family portrait; the image appears slightly sinister.** In front of the air vent, a low-backed chair and a small table: telephone, books, lamp which gives off a cruel light. As the curtain rises, it uncovers a death chamber. In front of the bed, on the ground, lies a woman in a long nightgown, like an assassin. Silence. The woman wakes up, changes her pose, and becomes motionless again. Finally, she decides to get up, take a coat from the bed, and start toward the door, but pauses before she reaches the telephone. When she touches the door, the telephone rings. She quickly fastens her coat. The coat is bothering her, so she removes it and kicks it away from herself. She picks up the telephone.

From this moment, she will speak standing, sitting, on her back, face-down, on her side, on her knees in front of the file cabinet and arm chair, her head down,
leaning against the file cabinet, surveying the room, dragging the telephone cord, until she finally falls on the bed as per her custom. Her head hangs down, and she hangs up the receptor as though it were a pebble.

She should select one pose for each section of the monologue-dialogue (the dog section, the lie section, the telephone subscriber section, etc.). Her anxiety isn’t revealed quickly, but gradually, with the sequence of poses exposing her discomfort.

Nightgown, ceiling, door, armchair, covers, white lampshades.

Find a lighting prompt that forms a high shadow behind the seated woman and emphasizes the lighting of the lampshade.

The style of this piece excludes anything that might resemble brilliance. The author recommends to whomever will play the role without his direction to omit any irony of a damaged woman, any sourness. The character is an ordinary victim, in love from her head to her feet: she tries only one trick: to coax him into admitting his lie, hoping that he won’t leave her with this petty memory. He would like the actress to give the impression that she is bleeding, to bleed like a limping beast, to end the act in a room covered in blood.

Respect the text with its French mistakes, its repetitions, the twists of words, the -platitudes, which are the result of careful attention.\(^5^3\)

While some details have been excluded in Poulenc’s work, Cocteau’s instructions offer insight into Madame’s character and her surroundings. Imagining her dark, gloomy room helps to create the proper ambiance. Envisioning her sprawled across the floor, lacking the motivation or energy to rise, portrays the woman’s lethargy. It is interesting to consider the woman a “mediocre victim” (“une victime mediocre”). Victims of suicide (or attempted suicide) are hardly mediocre in their suffering. It is also notable that Cocteau directed the woman to reveal her despair slowly, not giving away any trace of it at the beginning. Poulenc’s music instead suggests anxiety from the opera’s first measure. In Cocteau’s play, Madame is instructed to expose her anguish as a crescendo, growing ever greater and more obvious throughout the piece until finally, it culminates in a dramatic climax. The woman is left either to kill herself, or to live a life of loneliness.

and misery. In Poulenc’s opera, the music creates a different trajectory. While the character’s instability and suffering do grow to an apex at the work’s end, they are interrupted by moments of happiness as the woman forgets her fate. Each return to reality brings with it more intense suffering.

There are several sections of the play’s script that were eliminated from the opera’s libretto. While none of these details alter the plot, many of them add depth to both Madame’s and Monsieur’s characters, and to their relationship. The first comes near the beginning of the play. As Madame is arguing with her neighbors about the party line, she accuses her neighbor of being “very unpleasant.” Her accusation creates the sense that she is, at least at times, volatile.

The next omitted section comes shortly thereafter, when Madame describes a fur coat she wore over her pink dress. Because her room is disheveled and she is unkempt, it may seem that she is a woman of humble means. Contrarily, the mention of her fur coat, along with the description of her evening outings (which the audience does not yet know is a lie), may make her seem like a socialite.

The next omitted section comes shortly after Madame is first connected with her lover at the beginning of the play. It follows:

Don’t admire me. I move like I’m asleep. I get dressed, I go out, I come back home mechanically. Maybe I will be stronger tomorrow.

You? No. No, my darling, I don’t blame you at all. I…I…let…What? Very natural… on the contrary… it… we have always agreed that we would act with honesty, and I would have thought it criminal if you had left me without knowing until the last minute. The shock would have been too brutal if I had not had time to adjust. 54

54 Cocteau, Théâtre, 180.
Omitting this section from the libretto altered Madame’s character slightly. Poulenc’s heroine did not reveal that she was heartbroken until later. In fact, it was not until Rehearsal 19 on page 10 of the opera that it is even clear that the two have separated. This revelation coincides with the opera’s first occurrence of the “lament motive,” during which, Madame gives Monsieur permission to retrieve a sack containing the letters the couple exchanged during their relationship. Placing the Lament Motive at this point in the opera suggests Madame’s mourning the loss of the relationship. (see Musical Example 12).

![Musical Example 12 Measures 115-116](image)

Musical Example 12 Measures 115-116

Despite her underlying neurosis, the beginning of their conversation seems natural and comfortable. It is not until measure 159 that she begins to reveal her distress, blaming herself for their parting. (see Musical Example 13).

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56 Translations: *The bag? Your letters and mine. You can come get them whenever you’d like.*
57 Poulenc, *La Voix*, 13.
This omitted section also suggests that the lovers knew from the beginning of the relationship that they would separate one day. This supports Cocteau’s notion of the woman as a “mediocre victim.” Having the expectation that the couple would split would have alleviated her pain. Though saddened, she would not have been shocked at his decision to part ways. This alleviates some of the work’s dramatic tension; therefore, cutting the section maintains a more operatic level of tension in Poulenc’s version. If the performer is to take the omitted material into consideration for this scenario, she must underplay the moments of dramatic intensity. It seems incongruous that she would have attempted suicide, though, if there was mediocrity in her suffering. She would have likely recovered from the event and regained her independence in the future. Having known the relationship would eventually end would have allowed her time to prepare for the

Musical Example 13 Measures 159-162

58 Poulenc, La Voix, 14.
59 Translation: It was I who wanted to come, it was I who kept my mouth shut, it was I who told you that everything was fine.
separation, lessening the degree of her mourning, and allowing her attitude to vary throughout the performance.

The next omission further clarifies that she didn’t expect to stay in a relationship with Monsieur, again weakening the strength of their bond, and making Madame’s dramatic reaction to the situation seem disproportionate.

It wasn’t the same… maybe, but it was good to have known, to expect the hardship, you still fall backward… Don’t exaggerate… I still need time to get used to this. You were always careful to pamper me, to help me to sleep… Our love was up against too many things. We had to resist, to deny ourselves five years of happiness or accept the risks. I never thought that our life together would work out. I wouldn’t give back one second of our joy for anything… Hello!... Not for anything and I regret… I regret nothing – nothing – nothing…

This monologue makes it seem that Cocteau’s Madame realizes that her despair is excessive, which weakens her passion for Monsieur and could support Cocteau’s notion of the woman as a “mediocre victim.” Having the expectation that the couple would split would have alleviated her pain.

In the next excluded passage, Madame refers again to the separation and her preceding expectation. She considers how difficult it must be for women who do not have the opportunity to prepare for break up, repeating several times throughout the passage that she knew it would happen. More importantly, in the same passage she references a picture of a woman that Monsieur had hidden in a magazine. She did not want to mention it to him sooner, for fear that she would spoil their last few weeks together. For Madame, this is the first concrete piece of evidence that he was having an affair. In the opera, we are left to guess whether or not he was faithful to Madame, and

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61 Cocteau, Théâtre, 181.
though we are led to believe that he is in a relationship with another woman in Poulenc’s work, we are never told directly whether that is true. It is assumed that he lied about being home because he was with his new lover, and that the two will be going to Marseille together. A character whose heart was broken by an unfaithful lover would be more apt to be angry than one whose relationship ended due to mutual understanding between the parties involved. 61 This dichotomy presents variance in her attitude; she would be both angry and forgiving, gentle and abrasive, agitated and calm. Though she expected that they would eventually part ways, Madame would likely not have been prepared for Monsieur to find a new lover before he ended the relationship. In turn Madame would be less trusting of Monsieur during their final phone call. Her distrust would have been heightened when Madame discovers that Monsieur has lied about being home when, in an effort to reconnect with Monsieur after a dropped connection, Madame calls his home, and his concierge, Joseph, informs her that Monsieur is out for the evening. Her distrust is further supported by her sudden aggravation when Monsieur claims that the loud music Madame is hearing through the telephone is his neighbor’s; Madame likely believes that Monsieur’s new lover is playing the gramophone, since she is now aware that Monsieur is not at home.

The final excluded passage is the most potentially relevant to interpreters of Poulenc’s opera. At first, the man reacts to Madame’s volatile temper in dealing with her neighbor who interrupted their phone conversation. (This is referenced in the opera, but

61 Cocteau, Théâtre, 188.
it is reduced to just a few phrases). Then, she reveals that the man is engaged to another woman.

I… oh, my darling, this woman was very rude, and she doesn’t know you at all. She thinks you are like other men. But no, my dear! It’s not at all the same… What remorse?… Hello! Drop it! Drop it! It’s over. Don’t think about this stupid thing anymore! It’s over… How naïve you are! Who? whoever! The day before yesterday, I ran into the person whose name starts with S… With the letter S – B.S. – yes, Henri Martin… She asked me if you had a brother, and if it was his marriage that was announced… What do you expect that to do to me?… The truth… An air of condolences… I admit that I allowed it to drag on. I told you that I had people at my house… Don’t come looking for me between noon and 2:00pm, it’s very easy. People hate to be neglected, and little by little, I turned away from everyone… I didn’t want to lose one minute with you… completely fair. They can say whatever they want… We have to be fair. Our situation is inexplicable for people… for people… people either love it or hate it. Break-ups are break-ups. They’ll leer. You’ll never make them understand… you… You will never make them understand certain things…

The first segment of this passage infers that the two are bickering, demonstrating that their relationship may have been tumultuous. He is put off by her insolence toward the neighbor. She seems boorish to him, while he appears overly-sensitive to her. The two are different in ways that would have prevented their relationship from succeeding. But more important is the next segment of the passage. In Cocteau’s play, Madame’s is abrasive and direct, addressing the man’s engagement unapologetically. The pair parted only days before the telephone conversation takes place, so we are to understand that his engagement is indicative of infidelity. Because of his reaction to her brashness, we can suppose that Monsieur sought out a new relationship out of discontent with his present situation.

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62 Cocteau, Théâtre, 192.
Though we are aware of his culpability in ending the relationship with infidelity, this passage brings awareness to the unhealthy nature of their relationship long before the separation. Knowing that their relationship was at least somewhat destructive, Madame would realize that all attempts to rekindle their love would be in vain, and she would likely approach these efforts feebly. Her suicide attempt, therefore, would not likely serve as an attempt to coerce Monsieur back into their unhealthy relationship, but rather a cry for help, realizing that she didn’t know how to approach life without him, and understanding that her brash nature would make it difficult for her to find new love. Her passion for Monsieur, and her erratic temperament caused a brief lapse in judgment, one about which she was embarrassed, causing her to hide it from Monsieur until half way through the opera. She had not planned on ending her life the previous evening, but the dangerous mix of intoxication and loneliness would have caused her despair.

In this scenario, Madame would likely experience a wide range of emotions, including love, sadness, anger, tenderness, or reminiscence, making this approach to the character the most dramatically varied. She might be abrasive when speaking with neighbors who have cut in on her telephone conversation, as it prolongs her absence from Monsieur. She would likely take the emotions in the piece’s text at face-value, without an attached ulterior motive. The performer should find places in the text for comic relief, adding to the depth of the character’s realism. For example, when she flirts with Monsieur at measure 227, accurately guessing what he is wearing and what he is doing, she would likely be light-hearted, and she might giggle when he laughs at her accurate guess. When her responses are abrupt and suddenly angry, she should quickly shift her
mood to portray Madame’s curtness. For example, when Madame transforms from tranquil, tender placations during measures 246-257, to sudden agitation at measure 258, jumping an octave, and altering her dynamic from pianissimo to fortissimo, the performer should portray the abrupt shift in her body posture and facial expression, as well as timbre and dynamic. Poulenc directs the singer to approach this section in a very violent manner, urging her to embody Madame’s brashness wholly. (see Musical Example 14).
Translation: I don’t know. I avoid looking at myself. I don’t dare turn on the bathroom light. Yesterday, I found myself nose-to-nose with an old woman... No, no! An old woman with white hair and a bunch of little wrinkles.


Translation: Yes, Yes, Yes, I promise you. I promise. You are kind.
In a performance based closely on Cocteau’s play, Madame would not likely end her life. Because she was prepared for the separation, she would not have been blindsided by Monsieur’s decision to leave her.

When asked whether or not she referenced Cocteau’s play in her preparation of the sung role, Emily Hindrichs replied “‘I did not. I’ve used literary references for characters before but, in this case, I felt Poulenc and Cocteau had already used their judgment in differentiating the operatic Elle vs. the Elle from the play.’” The two characters, though closely linked, are disparate if the original play is not taken into consideration. Camille Zamora agreed with Hindrichs’s assessment:

With all due respect to Cocteau, the work does not take flight for me as an unsung play as much as it does in its operatic incarnation. To me, where the play can start to feel maudlin, Poulenc’s opera – through his recurring melodic motives and the freshness of his musical ideas overall – brings a multi-faceted quality to Elle that is not as clear in the play. It is through Poulenc’s melodies and harmonic structure, as much as through any of the words conveyed, that we learn who Elle is, and why her love is so intense and so true.”

Both Zamora and Hindrichs allowed the music to dictate their understandings of the role, and considered Poulenc’s omissions an important factor in creating Madame’s character. The absence of Cocteau’s influence allows a performer of the opera to emphasize the dramatic elements of the piece, which are heightened due to Poulenc’s music.

Jean Cocteau served as the director in the opera’s 1959 premiere, featuring soprano Denise Duval. While Cocteau allowed Madame Duval the freedom to portray the character in a way that was authentic to her, the character from his original play

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strongly informed her performance of the role. In a video coaching of the opera, Duval reveals that she understands Monsieur to be a “swine,” echoing Cocteau’s character. In a 1970 film version of the opera, Duval exhibits the influence of Cocteau’s Madame by following the emotional contour of the play bn’s script and reacting to Monsieur’s responses as Cocteau’s heroine would have.

In Poulenc’s opera, Madame’s heartache culminates in a dramatic, highly emotional ending. Her anguish is palpable at the opera’s end, but a character based on Cocteau’s would have the strength to recover from her mourning, and continue to live as the strong, vibrant, passionate, and sometimes abrasive woman that had always been. Though the opera’s final chords reveal the depth of her despair, the audience is reminded of the realistic character depicted throughout the opera whose anger is quick to acquiesce, and whose distress is often interrupted by tenderness or light-heartedness.

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CHAPTER II – SCENARIO 2: DRUG ADDICTION

In the next scenario, prolonged drug abuse, namely, an addiction to sleeping pills, has led Madame to the precipice of sanity, and she is holding dearly to the only firm ground she can grasp, her darling Monsieur. It is possible in this situation that Madame has attempted suicide before, and that Monsieur believes her most recent attempt to be yet another cry for help. He loves Madame, but he is unable to care for her any longer. In measures 73-77, Madame reveals that she took a sleeping pill the previous evening. When Monsieur asks her to confirm that she has not taken more than one, she assures him she has not, only to later admit she took twelve, and later change that number to forty. This leads the audience to believe that this has been a problem in the past.

In their book *Substance Abuse: A Comprehensive Textbook*, Doctors Pedro Ruiz and Eric Strain list the following symptoms of sedative abuse: lack of coordination, dizziness, light-headedness, hallucinations, lack of focus, slurred speech, unsteady gait, impaired memory, unusual euphoria, avoidance of responsibilities, depression, and suicidal thoughts.\(^69\) In choosing this approach to Madame’s character, the performer should portray poor coordination through awkward movements, perhaps tripping over objects in the room as she paced back and forth, awaiting his phone call. The headache she mentions at measure 78 could be caused by the dizziness she experienced after taking her pills. Though she tells Monsieur that she is feeling better, an aching head could be responsible for some of the sudden shifts in her demeanor.

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An intoxicated Madame may also be delusional. In some noted performances, Madame pulls the telephone cord out of the wall three-quarters of the way through the opera. The entire final section of the conversation with Monsieur is then a figment of her imagination, including the part where he likely reveals that he has met another woman. She might laugh uncontrollably at inappropriate points in the opera, and cry suddenly, a result of her addiction-induced depression; She might accompany each instance of the Lament Motive with a sudden outburst of crying. For example, at measure 115, after a mundane section of text regarding the broken telephone connection, Madame might suddenly begin to weep at Monsieur’s mention of the couple’s shared belongings, which he intends to retrieve. (see Musical Example 15).

Musical Example 15 Measures 115-116

She could unexpectedly explode into a fit of laughter at measure 235-237, when, after she accurately guesses when Monsieur is wearing, he beings to chuckle at her correctness. (see Musical Example 16). A performer could choose points in the opera to slur the text, but this could create challenges for the audience, as important text must be intelligible for the story to be understood. However, there are sections of the opera in which it is impossible to discern Monsieur’s topic of conversation, and therefore,

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70 Hindrichs, Emily. E-mail interview, March 13, 2015.
Madame’s replies are inconsequential. Between measures 180 and 185, Monsieur is asking questions to which Madame responds with brief affirmative or negative answers. (see Musical Example 17). There is no way to know what Monsieur is asking, so Madame’s answers are insignificant to the plot, creating an opportunity for a performer to slur her speech without negatively affecting the audience’s ability to follow the conversation.

Musical Example 16 Measures 235-237

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71 Poulenc, La Voix, 20-21
72 Translation: Ah! You’re laughing! I have eyes where my ears should be.
If Madame’s drug abuse is the cause for the couple’s separation, she would likely feel overwhelming guilt for hurting Monsieur, forcing her to assume responsibility for the relationship’s end. Her culpability would be supported by her numerous admissions of guilt and placations of Monsieur. The first instance comes at measure 121, when Madame says she is the stupid one, excusing Monsieur for refusing to pick up a sack of the couple's shared belongings. (see Musical Example 18). At measure 146, Madame again accepts blame for the separation, conceding that she got what she deserved; she had wanted to live a foolish life and to be reckless. (see Musical Example 19). This is perhaps the most blatant example of her acceptance of culpability; if Madame’s drug use is the

Musical Example 17 Measures 180-185

Translation: I still don’t know why. Yes, maybe. Oh, no! Definitely not now. And you?

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73 Poulenc. La Voix, 15-16
74 Translation: I still don’t know why. Yes, maybe. Oh, no! Definitely not now. And you?
cause of the separation, it would be fitting for her to acknowledge her desire for an irresponsible life. It is likely that her addiction had caused problems in the past, and though she would likely feel helpless to quit, she would understand the gravity of its effect on the relationship. Between measures 510 and 518, Madame begs Monsieur’s forgiveness for the intolerable situation into which she has brought him. She thanks him for her patience with her, but asks him to understand that she, herself, is suffering. (see Musical Example 20).

Musical Example 18 Measures 120-121

75 Poulenc, La Voix, 10.
76 Translation: And it is I who is stupid
Musical Example 19 Measure 146

77 Poulenc, *La Voix*, 12.
78 Translation: *I got what I deserve.*
Pardon-moi. Je sais que cette scène est intolerable et que tu as bien de la patience,
mais comprends-moi, je souffre, je souffre.

Musical Example 20 Measures 510-521

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79 Poulenc, *La Voix*, 46
80 Translation: *Forgive me. I know that this outburst is unbearable, and that you have been so patient, but understand me, I am suffering.*
If a performer chose this scenario, Madame’s suffering could refer to her struggle with addiction and depression, rather than her broken heart. Though she knows she is creating an unbearable situation for him, she needs his amnesty; she knows she is ill and she is unable to overcome her difficult struggle on her own. She needs his help, but she understands that she has driven him away. She is to blame for her addiction, but she does not know how to control it.

Madame likely commits suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills in this scenario, a choice exercised by Renata Scotto, in a 1996 Barcelona performance of the opera. The audience watches as Madame takes a handful of pills during the interlude at measure 330, right after she learns that Monsieur had been lying about his whereabouts, leading her to believe that he has found a new woman. At this point, the orchestra plays the “mounting tension motive” (see Musical Example 21). This motive is wrought with dissonance and uneven, dotted rhythms, and it signifies Madame’s ever-increasing anxiety as she impatiently awaits his phone call or response, or as she builds up courage to reveal information she is nervous about sharing. The point at which Scotto swallows the pills is nearly half way through the opera, allowing ample time for her body to reasonably react to the drug. Taking the pills at this point also affects Madame’s approach to Monsieur throughout the rest of the opera. If she knew that her life was about to end, she may be bolder and more comfortable asserting herself in the opera’s latter half. After taking the pills, she does not approach her responses as an effort to get Monsieur back, but rather a ploy to make him feel as guilty as possible about their separation and her impending death, which alleviates some of her culpability for the separation. Her admission of
attempted suicide and divulgence of her suffering forces him to accept blame. Various sections throughout the opera’s second half then become accusatory and despondent, such as measures 534-544, during which Madame expresses that Monsieur was the sole air she breathed for five years, and that without him, her life was meaningless; only his presence could revive her. At the end of this section, Poulenc employed the Deep Breath motive, as Madame voices to Monsieur that she presently only has air to breathe because he is speaking to her. (see Musical Example 22). The use of the Deep Breath motive here is a plea, begging for Monsieur’s pity, and hoping to make it clear that without him, she cannot live.

Musical Example 21 Measures 330-332
Translation: For the five years, we were together, that you were the air I breathed, that I spent my time waiting for you, that I thought you were dead if you were late, that the thought of your death killed me, and your return revived me.
During the often-cut dog scene, Madame references the couple’s shared pet, admonishing Monsieur’s admission that he doesn’t want to keep the dog; she compares herself to the dog, couching her own feelings of inadequacy, using the dog’s situation as an analogy for herself. (see Musical Example 23). In using the Lament Motive at 584, Madame appeals to Monsieur to feel sorry for her; she understands the dog’s plight all too well, as she, herself, feels completely unwanted and unloved. In the following measures, the application of the Ties Motive calls attention to the couple’s strengthened bond created by the dog.

Musical Example 23 Measures 584-590

83 Poulenc, La Voix, 53.
84 Translation: I understand it all too well. He loves you. He doesn’t see you coming back anymore. He thinks it’s my fault.
In this scenario, Madame’s death not only aims to alleviate her suffering, but to make sure that Monsieur lived with remorse for having caused her demise. The ending would be quite different if Madame waited until the opera’s final measures to swallow the pills. Such an act would be committed out of despair and hopelessness. The entire opera would be filled with ploys to convince Monsieur to return to her. Towards the beginning of the opera, when Madame invents details about her outing the previous evening, fabricating her strength in the face of the separation, her lies are meant to display her courage to Monsieur. She hopes he will be attracted to this newfound confidence. When she does finally confess that the separation has sent her into the throes of depression, causing her to attempt suicide, it is not only to cause a sense of responsibility in him, but also to make him see that she is incapable of surviving without him.

Like Madame, Poulenc had struggled with abuse of sleeping pills, long bouts of depression and anxiety, and thoughts of suicide. The composer’s insecurity was allayed when he met a much younger lover, Louis Gautier, in 1957, nearly 30 years his junior. Still, when Poulenc was apart from his lover, he endured feelings of solitude and anguish, sentiments which propelled the hysterical atmosphere of La Voix humaine. Duval recalled watching Poulenc compose the score “page by page, bar by bar, with his flesh, but also with my wounded heart, for we were both at that time going through an emotional crisis; we wept together, and La Voix humaine was like a chronicle of our torment.”

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CHAPTER III – SCENARIO 3: ABUSIVE MONSIEUR

In the third possible scenario, Monsieur is abusive. He has alienated Madame, and she has grown dependent upon him. In Dr. K.J. Wilson’s book *When Violence begins at Home*, the author lists five common characteristics of battered women: 1) She accepts blame for her abuse, 2) She has lowered self-esteem, 3) She experiences guilt, 4) She has feelings of hopelessness or passivity, and 5) She denies and minimizes the abuse. If Madame is following these common traits of a battered woman, her self-confidence is deflated, and she lives in constant fear that Monsieur will abruptly lose his temper. She feels a constant need to please Monsieur, in hopes that she might assuage his anger.

Throughout the score, there are numerous examples of Madame’s acceptance of blame for the separation. At measure 121, Madame calls herself stupid for causing the relationship to crumble, then quickly placates Monsieur, twice repeating that he is kind (see Musical Example 24). At measure 153, she exclaims that everything was her fault, and that he should not excuse her for her wrong-doings. A few measures later, from measures 159-162, she feebly attempts to justify her need to assume culpability, explaining that she was the one who never revealed her displeasure in the relationship, and that she regretted allowing Monsieur to believe that nothing was wrong (see Musical Example 25). At this point in the score, the Appearing Calm motive accompanies Madame. She worries that her words might upset Monsieur, allowing his rage to surge, so she is aware that she must seem tranquil to avoid his temper. At measure 458, after

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divulging that she had attempted suicide the previous evening, Madame apologizes to Monsieur for causing him harm, though she was clearly the one suffering. (see Musical Example 26). This brief section is unaccompanied, allowing Madame to timidly cower from her apology in an attempt to avoid angering Monsieur, allowing the singer to shrink to an apprehensive pianissimo without being obscured by the orchestra. Madame again begs Monsieur’s forgiveness from measures 510-515, apologizing for the dramatic scene she has created, and thanking him for his enduring patience with her. (see Musical Example 27). While she wails her apology this time, the Reminiscing Motive plays in the orchestra beneath her, creating the impression that expressive apologies such as this one have been common in the couple’s relationship. The lyricism of this motive creates an intensely heart-felt atmosphere, displaying Madame’s suppliant attitude towards her lover. Toward the opera’s end, Madame cautiously tries to persuade Monsieur to admit that he has been lying to Madame regarding his whereabouts. She carefully tries to convince him that, if he has been dishonest in an effort to protect her from a painfully reality, she would only feel more tenderness toward him. When he angrily lashes out at her apparent accusation, she quickly tries to quell his temper, swearing that she believes him, though, in reality, she knows that he has been lying to her. In this section, during the passages in which Madame is alluding to Monsieur’s dishonesty, the orchestra consistently plays the Appearing Calm motive, again demonstrating Madame’s inclination to maintain her temper in an effort to pacify Monsieur. In passages during which Madame is excusing herself for the accusation and avidly claiming to believe him, Madame’s recitative is unaccompanied, indicating her lack of support, allowing her to
nearly fall apart just as her melody does. Monsieur seemingly regains his temper, and
Madame continues her careful allegation, until the two are disconnected, causing
Madame to ardently pray that Monsieur will call again. Madame’s glorification of
Monsieur as a good and kind man, and her acceptance of culpability for the couple’s
separation demonstrate her minimization of the abuse and the guilt she experiences for
having hurt her darling love.

Musical Example 24 Measures 120-121

Musical Example 25 Measures 160-162
Musical Example 26 Measures 458-460

Musical Example 27 Measures 510-515

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87 Poulenc, La voix, 41.
88 Translation: You are good, my dear. My dear darling to whom I have done wrong.
89 Poulenc, La Voix, 46.
90 Translation: Forgive me. I know that this scene is intolerable and that you are being very patient.
In his book *Malignant Self Love: Narcissism Revisited*, Sam Vaknin, Ph.D., writer and mental-health researcher, posits that “abuse is the ultimate act of perverted intimacy. The abuser invades the victim’s body, pervades his psyche, and possesses his mind. Deprived of contact with others and starved for human interactions, the prey bonds with the predator.” Over the course of their relationship, Madame has grown to need Monsieur’s attention, despite (or because of) his lack of affection. She has grown accustomed to the abuse, even feeling a need for it, as it is her only means of connection with another person. She holds herself responsible for Monsieur’s cruelty, and she accepts it as a necessary part of their relationship. She has both grown fearful of him and dependent on him. She has lost sight of her own needs and hopes in favor of fulfilling those of Monsieur.

There are several instances in the score that indicate Madame’s lowered self-esteem. Between measure 238 and 270, Madame begs that Monsieur not imagine her appearance, as her sadness and sleeplessness has begun to make her look like a wrinkled, old woman whose reflection in the mirror is horrifying to Madame. He seemingly disputes her claim, and she asks him not to call her face admirable, insisting that she prefers his more common term, “ugly little mug” (see Musical Example 28). Such insults could gradually reduce Madame’s confidence, and would likely make her more susceptible to accepting abuse. This entire section is sung *a cappella*, portraying Madame’s emotional instability and exposing her insecurities. During measures 382-390, Madame begins to divulge the degree of her misery; she reveals that she has been waiting

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91 Vaknin, Sam. *Malignant Self-Love: Narcissism Revisited*. 59
by the telephone for the call Monsieur promised her, and seemingly made her await. She describes herself pacing the room and impatiently shifting positions frequently until she went crazy with worry that he would not call as he promised. (see Musical Example 29). The orchestra repetitively plays the Appearing Calm motive until Madame reaches the vocal apex of the opera, singing the word *folle* or “crazy” on a C₆, when she is accompanied by the deep breath motive, which continues for two measures after she has stopped singing. This motive is meant to help Madame regain her composure after an emotionally intense passage. She is afraid to reveal the degree to which her confidence has been broken, and any outburst may cause Monsieur to become enraged. After Madame has divulged that she attempted suicide, she tries to explain to Monsieur why she was so broken by the separation. From measures 534-544, she reveals that, for the five years the two spent together, her entire life revolved around Monsieur; he was the air that she breathed, and every moment the two were separated, Madame was terrified that he wouldn’t return to her. When he finally did return, she spent every moment dreading the time he would leave again. Her ability to be alone was shattered. (see Musical Example 30). At the beginning of this segment, Madame sings *a cappella*, and Poulenc indicates that it should be sung “very nervously, but restrained.” She is timid, and gradually, as the passage continues, the orchestra begins playing the Appearing Calm motive, indicating that Madame’s anxiety is increasing as her confidence dwindles. As she finishes this section, sighing that she is only now able to breathe because he is speaking to her, the orchestra switches to the Deep Breath motive, allowing her to regain her composure and her confident façade. Madame has learned to depend completely on
Monsieur. She does not have faith in herself that she is capable of surviving or thriving without him. His abusive discourse has become her inner-monologue.

Musical Example 28 Measures 268-270

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92 Poulenc, La Voix, 23.
93 Translation: I liked it better when you said “look at this ugly little mug.”
Because I was expecting your phone call, by looking at the phone, sitting down, standing up, and pacing the room, I became crazy!

Poulenc, La Voix, 34.
Translation: For the five years, we were together, that you were the air I breathed, that I spent my time waiting for you, that I thought you were dead if you were late, that the thought of your death

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96 Poulenc. La Voix, 48-49.
97 Translation: For the five years, we were together, that you were the air I breathed, that I spent my time waiting for you, that I thought you were dead if you were late, that the thought of your death

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Madame’s feelings of hopelessness are responsible for her attempted suicide in this scenario, as she likely feels that she is not worthy of love. Evidence of Madame’s desperation does not appear until she has revealed details about her suicide attempt, but after this divulgence, details supporting her bleak attitude are ubiquitous. The first appears at measure 505, when Madame expresses to Monsieur that, had he not called her as he promised, she would have died. (see Musical Example 31). Madame’s sings an eerie chromatic line to accompanies this admission, and the following motive played by a single cello is foreboding, especially considering Poulenc’s instruction that the segment should be played calmly and decisively. From measures 551-563, Madame speculates that she will not be able to sleep again in the future, and she worries about what she will do without Monsieur by her side; she does not see a promising future for herself alone. She cannot imagine a purpose behind getting out of bed or eating, because she will never again have anywhere to go or anything to do. (see Musical Example 32). As she sings this passage, her pitch ascends chromatically, the tempo quickens, and the dynamic grows steadily, just as her anxiety does. Her future without Monsieur is bleak, and she cannot find the motivation to continue her hopeless life. Between measures 646 and 658, Madame’s agitation swells again, when she discloses that even a single glance between the two could change everything; he could abandon his desire to separate from Madame, and risk the relationship once again. They could convince each other that they still killed me, and your return revived me, and when you were there, to die of fear that you would leave again. Now, I can breathe because you are speaking to me.
adored one another. But because their final conversation takes place through a telephone, what is finished, is finished. (see Musical Example 33). In this section, Madame’s distress is inherent in her vocal line, which gradually ascends in pitch, and culminates in a fortissimo presentation of the Deep Breath motive during Madame’s statement that a single glance between the pair could change Monsieur’s mind, indicating Madame’s hope that the two might be able to rekindle their love; but her hope is quashed when she realizes that the separation provided by the telephone ensures that the separation is final. At this point, the pitch begins to descend and the dynamic diminishes, until the end of the phrase, when Madame descends directly an octave from E₅ to E₄, which is accompanied by a dominant-function E chord with a jazz chord extension, creating an intensely dissonant sonority, which mirrors Madame’s harsh outlook.

![Musical Example 31 Measures 505-509](image)

98 Poulenc, La Voix, 45.
99 Translation: If you hadn’t called, I would have died.
Musical Example 32 Measures 555-561

Translation: And... and in admitting that I sleep, after sleep, there are dreams. And waking up, and eating, and getting up, and getting washed, and going out, and going where?
Musical Example 33 Measures 646-658

Translation: In time, we’ll see. You could lose your head, forget the promises, risk the impossible, convince those you love and embrace them, clinging to them. A glance could change everything. But with the phone, that which is finished, is finished.

Poulenc, La Voix, 59-60.
Madame turns to sleeping pills to escape from his vicious behavior. According to Vaknin, “obsessed by endless ruminations, demented by pain and the reactions to maltreatment – sleeplessness, malnutrition, and substance abuse – the victim regresses, shedding all by the most primitive defense mechanisms…”

If a performer were choosing to approach the role from this perspective, she would demonstrate a more timid demeanor. She would emphasize sections in which she takes blame for the break up, and exaggerate each compliment she gives him, such as her frequent inclination to tell him he is kind. Madame would rarely sing loudly, and she would shrink any time he said anything cruel to her. She would rush through sections that might anger Monsieur, and approach sections that might upset him with trepidation. Her body posture would be apologetic, especially immediately following sections in which she displays bravery. In dealing with her neighbors who have cut in on the line, she would be timid, but she would try to assert herself as well as she was able, trying to prove to Monsieur that she is willing to protect him. She would relish each opportunity to speak with him, and would do anything in her limited power to expedite breaks in their conversation.

Madame may kill herself in this scenario, but it would seem more potent if she ended the opera emotionally weak, but alive. According to Vaknin, “Inevitably, in the aftermath of the abuse, its victims feel helpless and powerless. This loss of control over one’s life and body is manifested physically in impotence, attention deficits, and insomnia. This is often exacerbated by the disbelief many abuse victims encounter, especially if they are unable to produce scars, or other “objective” proof of their ordeal.

104 Vaknin, 96.
Language cannot communicate such an intensely private experience as pain.” 105 One can imagine that she would eventually recover and find new love, though the memory of an abusive Monsieur may still haunt her. Perhaps her new lover would be as cruel and abusive as Monsieur, or perhaps she would be unable to relinquish control, creating unstable, distant relationships for the remainder of her life. The opera’s final chords would leave Madame weak and hopeless, unable to grasp that her nightmare is over, and unable to find strength in the face of her need for his control.

105 Vaknin, 78.
CHAPTER IV – SCENARIO 4: UNEXPECTED SEPARATION

In the final scenario option, the break-up is sudden and unexpected for Madame, plunging her into an unforeseen period of grief. Madame and Monsieur have had a loving relationship for five years, but Monsieur has met and fallen in love with another woman. Madame is confused, angry, and more upset than she would have been if she had had more time to prepare for the separation. She had planned their future together; she expected they would marry and have a family. She dreamed they would grow old together. Now, suddenly, her future seems shapeless. In their final telephone conversation, Madame is torn between appearing strong and confident in hopes that it might remind Monsieur of the independent woman with whom he fell in love, and revealing her broken heart, perhaps out of a desire to make Monsieur feel guilty, and perhaps because she can no longer conceal her pain.

Some psychologists posit that the human emotional response to ending a romantic relationship is similar to the grief experienced after the death of a loved one. Our natural response to separation follows the same five phases of grief described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her book *On Death and Dying*: 1) Denial, 2) Anger, 3) Bargaining, 4) Depression, and 5) Acceptance. Poulenc’s score follows these five steps closely, both in the music and the libretto.

According to Jennifer Kromberg, during the denial phase, “even though we know the relationship is over, we really don’t believe it. Against the better judgement of

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107 Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. *On Death and Dying*. 

everyone around us, we entertain fantasies of things somehow working out.” This sentiment is exhibited when, after Madame and Monsieur are first connected, Madame invents a series of events that took place prior to the present conversation. Though in other scenarios, Madame lies to Monsieur to convince him that she is recovering quickly from the recent separation, in this final scenario, she is fabricating details of her outings to assure herself that she has the strength to overcome her heartbreak. She begins the conversation as though nothing has happened between them. This is demonstrated in the music through the use of the Casual Conversation Motive. (see Musical Example 34). Without knowing that the events being described are untrue, the audience believes this opening section to be a mundane conversation between two people. Madame appears light-hearted and rather content. She describes a lovely evening out with her dear friend, Marthe, and does not display even a hint of despondency until measure 115, when Monsieur mentions a sack of the couple’s shared belongings, which he intends to retrieve. At this point, Madame’s sadness is briefly revealed through the use of the Lament Motive and Poulenc’s direction to sing the passage “very calmly and mournfully.” (see Musical Example 35). Madame’s denial returns at measure 155, when she reminisces about her first encounter with Monsieur, allowing her to revisit the happiness she experienced at the beginning of the relationship. Poulenc appropriately applies the Reminiscing Motive here, as Madame allows her thoughts to wander, fantasizing that the two are together again. (see Musical Example 36). But her contentment is quickly quashed when at measure 188, Monsieur again returns to the topic of the sack of belongings, revealing to Madame that he plans to send Joseph, his
conierge to fetch it, and reminding Madame of the finality of the separation, in an attempt to end any hope she has of rekindling the relationship. She responds with alarm, having seemingly forgotten that the relationship had ended. (see Musical Example 37). Though she agrees to comply with his demand to leave the sack at the concierge desk for Joseph to fetch it, she quickly and insistently returns to her denial, fantasizing that she will be spending the next few days in the countryside with Marthe. Her refusal to accept the situation continues, as she flirts with Monsieur, guessing what he is wearing and what he is doing, and teasing him about the accuracy of her predictions. Her denial phase is finally put to rest when, after the line is disconnected, Madame calls Monsieur’s apartment and is told by Joseph that Monsieur is not at home, though he had previously told her he was. The revelation of his lie forces Madame to confront the difficult truth that Monsieur is likely with another woman, and that the relationship is, in fact, over. For the first time since the separation, she is incapable of believing that he will return to her, and she must confront the agonizing reality that Monsieur no longer loves her.

Musical Example 34 Measures 52-54
Musical Example 35 Measures 115-116

Musical Example 36 Measures 155-158

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109 Translation: *Do you remember the Sunday at Versailles with the tire swing? Oh, well!*
Musical Example 37 Measures 188-195  

It is out of anger, the second stage of grief, that Madame approaches the next phase of the opera. She begins to blame Monsieur for her broken heart, and she hopes that he will assume culpability for her suicide attempt. When she divulges the degree of her suffering, she does so in hopes that he will feel remorse for hurting her. Though there

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110 Poulenc, *La Voix*, 16-17

111 Translation: *Tomorrow? I didn’t know that it would be so soon. Wait, it’s very easy: tomorrow morning, the sack will be at the concierge desk. Joseph will just have to come get it.*
are brief moments of tenderness in this section, the music generally reflects mounting tension and anxiety through the use of growing dynamics, accelerating tempo, and rising pitch. (see Musical Examples 38-41). After a brief period of tenderness, she again explodes in anger when she hears jazz music playing on his side of the line at measure 476. Though he lies, telling her that the music is playing in a neighbor’s apartment, she knows that his new lover must be responsible for the interruption, and she explosively warns him to pound on the wall, admonishing the neighbor to turn the music off. (see Musical Example 42) Her seething is palpable, and he complies immediately; the music stops suddenly, and the conversation continues.

Musical Example 38 Measures 351-352

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113 Translation: *Only, you know, we’re talking, we’re talking.*
Musical Example 39 Measures 383-390
Translation: And I couldn't feel my heart beating. And death was long-coming. And just as I had an intolerable anguish, after an hour, I called Martha.

Translation: Because you had told me you would call me, and I was afraid they would prevent me from talking to you.
Musical Example 42 Measures 482-495

Poulenc, *La Voix*, 44.

Translation: *I said: I hear music. Well, you should pound on the wall, and stop those neighbors from playing their gramophone at this hour!*
It is during the third stage of grief, bargaining, that one may try to “succeed in entering into some sort of an agreement which may postpone the inevitable happening.” According to Kübler-Ross, bargaining is the shortest stage of grief; appropriately, it is also limited in the opera. It begins in the dog phase. During this section, Madame tries to convince Monsieur that the couple’s shared pet needs Monsieur’s companionship. She dramatically describes the creature’s despondency, revealing that each time she has wanted to caress the dog, she has feared that he would bite her. He refuses to eat or move without his loving master, Monsieur, nearby. Madame believes that the dog blames her for Monsieur’s absence. (see Musical Example 43). In this passage, Madame’s responses are sung a cappella, while Monsieur’s interjections are portrayed by short, dissonant 2-chord groupings which represent his annoyance at Madame’s obvious attempt to lure him back into the relationship, baiting him by exaggerating the dog’s plight; he is not willing to concede. Madame’s final ploy to convince Monsieur to rekindle the romance begins at measure 672, when she tries to persuade him to confess that he has been lying about his whereabouts in an effort to guilt him into returning to her. (see Musical Example 44). In this section, the vocal line moves by minor seconds, tentatively trying to tempt Monsieur with her tenderness. This ploy is unsuccessful, as the line is suddenly cut, immediately ending the conversation. After fervently praying that Monsieur call again, the phone rings, and Madame attempts the same strategy again. This time her tactic is seemingly met with his anger, which she

\[120\] Kübler-Ross, 79.
quickly quashes, changing the subject, and suddenly realizing that the conversation must soon end.

Musical Example 43 Measures 569-578

\[ J'ai\ \text{voulu\ l'appeler,\ le\ caresser.} \]
\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Il refuse qu'on le touche.} & \quad \text{Un peu plus, il me mordrait.} & \quad \text{Oui, moi!} \\
\text{Je te jure qu'il m'effraye.} & \quad \text{Il ne mange plus.} & \quad \text{Il ne bouge plus. Et} \\
\text{quand il me regarde} & \quad \text{il me donne la chair de poule.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Translation: I wanted to call him, to caress him. He refuses for me to touch him. Anymore, and he would bite me. Yes, me! I swear to you that it frightens me. He doesn’t eat anymore. He doesn’t move anymore. And when he looks at me, it gives me goose-bumps.

\[121\text{Poulenc, La Voix, 45.} \]
\[122\text{Translation: I wanted to call him, to caress him. He refuses for me to touch him. Anymore, and he would bite me. Yes, me! I swear to you that it frightens me. He doesn’t eat anymore. He doesn’t move anymore. And when he looks at me, it gives me goose-bumps.} \]
The remainder of the opera expresses Madame’s depression, the fourth stage of grief. At measure 712, Poulenc introduces the Farewell Motive, a chromatic, winding, sentimental motive that occurs four times near the end of the score, each time the couple approaches the end of their final conversation. (see Musical Example 45). As this motive begins, Poulenc instructs the singer to wrap the telephone cord around her neck, using the cord to signify his voice, allowing her to feel him surrounding her. Perhaps she intends to use the cord to strangle or hang herself. Poulenc directs her to sing this section calmly and mournfully. She knows that ending the relationship is necessary, but she fears their final goodbye. She cannot imagine her life without him. After two repetitions of the Farewell Motive, Monsieur discloses to Madame that he will depart for Marseille.

\[\text{Musical Example 44 Measures 687-691}^{123}\,^{124}\]

\[\text{Je disais simplement que si tu me trompait par bonté d'à - me}
\]
\[\text{et que je m’en a - per - ço - ve, je n’en aurais que plus de ten - dres, se pour toi.}\]

\[\begin{align*}
\text{I simply said that if you lied to me out of the goodness of your heart, and I found out, I would feel even more affection for you.}
\end{align*}\]

123 Poulenc, La Voix, 63.
124 I simply said that if you lied to me out of the goodness of your heart, and I found out, I would feel even more affection for you.
the following evening, seemingly with his new lover. Madame is aghast as she responds to his confession; she sings this section a cappella, and Poulenc instructs the performer to sing it “almost spoken,” and “above all, not forte.”125 (see Musical Example 46).

Madame begs that he not stay in the hotel where they had stayed together so many times, and as she wails her request, the orchestra plays the Reminiscence motive beneath her, signifying the emotional memories the couple shared. When Monsieur complies with her request, she placates him, thanking him repetitively, and telling him he is kind, then professing her love for him for the first time in the opera. (see Musical Example 47). She firmly accents this confession as though it escapes her lips without intention. She sustains the word “love” for an entire measure, though she decrescendos as she sings, indicating her wavering confidence when she realizes that he is no longer his to love. The Farewell Motive appears again, and Madame apologetically tells Monsieur that her words were automatic and unplanned. She vehemently begs Monsieur to hang up the phone as the orchestra plays the final statement of the Deep Breath Motive beneath her, Madame bracing herself for the fearful end. Then, seemingly after Monsieur has hung up, Madame sobs the words “I love you” five times into a vacant receiver. The receiver falls to the floor, and the curtain closes (see Musical Example 48).

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125 La Voix, 67.
Musical Example 45 Measures 712-716

Musical Example 46 Measures 735-737

126 Poulenc, La Voix, 65.
127 Translation: I know that we must, but it’s dreadful. I will never be strong enough.
128 Poulenc, La Voix, 65.
129 Translation: No. To Marseille? Listen, my dear
Musical Example 47 Measures 741-744

130 Poulenc, La Voix, 68.
131 Translation: I would love it if you wouldn’t stay at the hotel where we usually stayed.
In this scenario, it is up to the performer to choose whether Madame reaches the final stage of grief: acceptance. Perhaps, she ends her life in the last chords of the opera, strangling or hanging herself, using a different weapon not mentioned in the score, or perhaps collapsing, dying of a broken heart. Or, there could be a tiny glimmer of hope in the opera’s conclusion. As George Martin points out, “as death would be a release from pain, it seems contrary to the play’s point.” When asked about her interpretation of the opera’s ending, Camille Zamora responded:


I like to think that after Elle collapses (from the toxic combination of the alcohol, self-medication, and grief coursing through her veins), she eventually comes to, looks at the orchestra, chooses a cute violinist, and heads out to a lovely café. In all seriousness, I have never actually felt a need to answer the “what happens to Elle afterward” question – specifically, whether or not she dies. In the opera’s final moments, all Elle is concerned with is putting into her voice, into her VOIX, all of the love that is in her heart. She has only this one moment, and only this one expression, through which to convey all of the love in her heart to someone she will never speak to again. She will never again be touched or touch in the same way she was with him. She will never love or be loved with this level of passion or soul-understanding again. So whether or not she literally expires, she is in fact saying goodbye to love in this moment, to feelings she knows will never be replicated. Her final expression, her final “I love you,” is complete and true and perfectly expressed. In that sense – as her last and best expression, honestly conveyed and truly heard unlike so much that has been said previously – it is a triumph. The effort of it collapses her, like a candle that is blown out.\textsuperscript{135}

If a performer does not choose to end her life in the opera’s final chords, perhaps it is not necessary to know what her future holds. Emily Hindrichs offers a different approach to the opera’s finale. When asked what became of Madame after the opera’s finale, she responded “\textit{I left it open - she was curled up on a chaise with the cord around her neck. On the last chord, she pulled the string on the lamp and went to black.}”\textsuperscript{136} This tactic allows the audience to decide Madame’s fate.

The relatability inherent in Poulenc’s opera allows us to believe that her situation is not overly dramatic or unrealistic. When one suffers from this type of loss, she often experiences heartbreak, and in the midst of her suffering, she does not know whether she will truly recover. In this scenario, Madame may not be focused on the day her suffering will end, she is simply enveloped in her present anguish. And whether or not she expects

\textsuperscript{135} Interview with Camille Zamora. March 28, 2015.
\textsuperscript{136} Hindrichs, Emily. E-mail interview. March 13, 2015.
it, there is hope at the end of her grief. Little by little, she will recover, and she will learn to live her life without Monsieur.
CHAPTER V – CONCLUSION

In an opera with so many variable interpretations, a singer must be diligent in choosing a character whose dramatic choices can be construed with authenticity and realism. Whether using influence from Cocteau’s work to create a dynamic and emotionally diverse character, emphasizing Madame’s abuse of sleeping pills discussed in the score, supposing Madame to be the victim of abuse, or imagining that the separation came as a shock to Madame, taking away her ability to accept Monsieur’s absence over time and forcing her into a grief-filled period of mourning, Madame’s authenticity must be communicable for an organic, emotional performance. Each of the interpretations offered in this document are feasible for a realistic, relatable character, and each can be developed with careful attention to detail and nuance throughout the score.

Though there are many variable elements in La Voix humaine, there are also several components that would remain unchanged, despite character choices. Because the language used in the libretto is informal and colloquial, Madame’s diction is often more akin to spoken French than French lyric diction. In most performances, Rs are uvular in any part of the range that would not affect the performer’s technique. Elisions and liaisons would be less precise, either through adding or neglecting them, and final consonants and schwas that are typically silent in spoken French would be avoided. The use of casual French diction would further demonstrate Madame’s authenticity, a factor that distinguished this opera from others. French lyric diction lends itself well to poetic, sophisticated French; it is not used by native Parisians, like the characters in this opera.
In the score, Poulenc outlined four instructions before the music is printed: 1) The role must be played by a young, elegant woman, not an older woman whose lover has abandoned her, 2) The tempo is flexible, and it is to be determined by the performer and the director together during the rehearsal process, 3) The performer must pass suddenly between anguish and calm, and vice versa and 4) The piece must be “bathed in great orchestral sensuality.” These four directions should not be variable based on the choices made for the character.

Madame’s wardrobe is also an invariable element, as it is dictated in the score. While Madame lies to Monsieur that she is wearing her pink dress and black hat after an imagined outing with her friend Marthe, she later divulges that she is wearing a night shirt which is covered by her coat, as she had prepared to go to his apartment unannounced to find him. She is disheveled, describing her wrinkled face, which has aged since he last saw her just three days prior to the phone call. Relentless anxiety and a lack of sleep have led to Madame’s unkempt appearance. Though Poulenc describes her as a young, elegant woman, the separation has had such a strong impact on her psyche that it is reflected in her face.

Though there are several unchangeable elements in the opera, its abundance of unknown variables creates a great opportunity to conceive a panoply of characters. Such freedom allows for an interesting experience for both the performer and the audience. Each singer can approach the role in her own way. This type of autonomy is uncommon in opera. Very often, creating character choices is based on the responses of other characters who are present and visible to the audience. The dynamic between all
performers involved in a production makes each performance unique, but the existence of
prescribed character interactions, such as shared dialogue, apparent social status, and
background information inherent in the libretto, limits the amount of freedom that each
performer is able to exercise. Poulenc’s work removes all of these boundaries and allows
each performer to choose the parameters of the opera, leaving her to decide upon and
communicate the details of the couple’s relationship and separation. Creating an
effective performance of this opera in which the performer is able to convey these
unspoken elements is a difficult, but worthwhile feat. Poulenc’s music is brilliant, and
Cocteau’s libretto is authentic and realistic. Such a work holds promise for great artistic
power if performed with commitment and a clear understanding of the character’s plight,
whatever that may be.
In order to explore possible interpretations of the role, I interviewed two women who have sung the piece: Sopranos Emily Hindrichs and Camille Zamora. My questions and their responses follow:

**What was the most rewarding thing about performing this role?**

Emily Hindrichs: Poulenc is always a good sing – you can count on him for that. Elle\(^{137}\) is not only a good sing, she’s a flesh-and-blood young woman. Sometimes, opera characters can be a little too polished – too good and virtuous, too evil and base – it’s rare one can play someone who is both tender and manipulative, vulnerable and proud. Elle makes you broaden your acting skill set.

Miss Hindrichs’s sentiments echo my previous statements concerning the verisimilitude of Madame’s character. She is an intense woman in the throes of a passionate situation, but unlike most opera heroines, she is not unrealistically dramatic; she is believable and relatable. This is perhaps the most important aspect of her character, and one of the most appealing facets of the opera, both for performers and audience members. Madame is able to communicate authentic, believable emotions in the midst of a plausible separation to which audience members can relate. An emotionally convincing performance of this opera has the power to evoke strong feelings of empathy, or at least, sympathy.

**What was most challenging about the role musically? Vocally? Dramatically?**

Emily Hindrichs: **Musically** – finding a balance between a structured recitative that stays true to the language (and what the composer wrote), and a fluidity that sounds unforced.

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\(^{137}\) Though the character is only called “Madame” in the score, she is sometimes referred to as “Elle,” meaning “she” when the role is being discussed.
Camille Zamora: Musically – The memorization! Also, maintaining a flexible but unified sense of ensemble with the orchestra, a give-and-take that allows Elle’s expressions to feel spontaneous and off-the-cuff when needed, but is always completely in synch and cohesive.

Though I agree with Hindrichs that balance and fluidity are crucial and challenging, I find the tonal instability, the movement through different tonal areas in sections of unaccompanied recitative, and the frequently and suddenly changing musical and emotional landscape to be more demanding. Due to the somewhat fragmented nature of the opera, unity between singer and orchestra is vital. As Miss Zamora point out, this increases the challenge of upholding the appearance of spontaneity in the role. Without cohesion between the voice and the orchestra, the work could easily fall apart, but if that collaboration is too precise, the performers risk losing the organic, unplanned quality of the opera which is necessary for the piece to be emotionally and dramatically effective.

Emily Hindrichs: Vocally - Remembering to sing every note. The sheer volume of quasi recitative is deceptive – one must stay connected to the breath from start to finish, or you will find yourself out of steam during the big push to the finale. Pacing is everything.

Camille Zamora: Vocally - Is there any other opera in the repertoire with so many words? To my knowledge, VOIX is one of the only, if not the only, opera that sets an entire play basically word for word, rather than setting a libretto that has distilled the play’s dialogue into the more streamlined text. The vocal challenge built into that is to convey a sense of naturalistic speech while simultaneously delivering the integrity and beauty of the sung line. Denise Duval’s recorded performances point to the fact that, while Poulenc designed the work to be highly theatrical, his ‘medium’ for the drama was indeed well-supported, operatic vocalism. Part of what conveys Elle’s allure (something Poulenc specifies must be evident for the piece to work) is her beauty of tone, which pulls us in to the magnetism still at work in her relationship (and without which, we’d risk wanting to say, ‘hang up already!’) Elle’s loveliness is built into the beauty of the vocal line, and is part of what makes her loss so heart-breaking.

Because there are so many sections of speech-like, casual recitative, and because there are so few orchestral interludes, a performer may be tempted to rest her body during
sections that require less effort. However, doing so could jeopardize her stamina through the poignant end of the opera. Therefore, it is crucial to maintain an engaged breath mechanism at all times. Though I agree with Miss Zamora that the elegance of the singer’s voice is crucial to convey the allure of the character, I find that Poulenc created such a magnificent vocal line, that it would be difficult to distort its beauty. For example, during the section in which Madame divulges that she attempted suicide the previous evening, the orchestra plays a steady waltz as Madame’s vocal line is sweeping, with long, elegant lines.

Emily Hindrichs: Dramatically – Portraying the character without being the character. The stakes are so high, and Poulenc writes this fantastic music that sweeps you along, it’s easy to get lost in your own experience. Doing so, you lose sight of the character’s trajectory, and you lose control over your ability to play the scene. My old voice teacher used to tell me that we want to make people in the audience cry, not ourselves.

Camille Zamora: Dramatically - The great dramatic challenge, I think, is not falling into the trap of “playing the ending,” as it were. At the start of the work, and with every new ring of the phone, Elle has hope; I think this must be conveyed. Sure, she is exhausted and has moments of hysterical desperation and terror, but also has wit, spirit, and humor. She can’t be played (as is sometimes a “default setting” with this work) as a purely hysterical, victimized creature. Elle is sexy, vibrant, proud, and very much alive, and we have to bring out those strands in the work when Poulenc/Cocteau offer it to us. By the same token, we have to “play against” the obvious currents of hysteria and heartbreak, which in the end will make the tragedy all the more affecting.

To me, the most dramatically challenging facet of this role is the need to portray both Madame’s character and Monsieur’s, solely through her reactions to his imagined interjections. The audience must gain an understanding of the nuances of their relationship and the details surrounding the couple’s separation. In order to maintain the character’s authenticity, it is crucial to portray both the character’s strengths and
weaknesses, rather than intensifying her sadness and carrying it throughout the opera.

Madame is not a static character. She has moments during which she exudes joy between emotionally charged, sad, or hysterical sections. It is important to portray each facet of her character in order for her to come to life.

Did the motives and phases affect your understanding and portrayal of the character?

Emily Hindrichs: I identified and labeled the different motives with character motivations – stalling, flirting, trying to distract, seduce, recalling, fabricating, etc. The fact that Poulenc repeated some of these motives, to me, indicated that Elle was trying to direct the conversation a certain way, and employing a multitude of techniques to do so. This, in itself, indicated something about her character – she hadn’t given up hope, despite all her talk about understanding and accepting the situation. She was making every last play for her lover, and she wasn’t afraid to play dirty. I think it’s also important to show how rash she can be – the kind of impulsiveness that one would expect from someone younger. She can’t sound too wise, or it goes against the erratic nature of the music.

Camille Zamora: Very much so! With all due respect to Cocteau, the work does not take flight for me as an unsung play as much as it does in its operatic incarnation. To me, where the play can start to feel maudlin, Poulenc’s opera – through his recurring melodic motives and the freshness of his musical ideas overall – brings a multi-faceted quality to Elle that is not as clear in the play. It is through Poulenc’s melodies and harmonic structure, as much as through any of the words conveyed, that we learn who Elle is, and why her love is so intense and so true.

I concur with both Miss Hindrichs and Miss Zamora. The motives employed throughout the opera create a sense of unity that helps bring the character to life. The musical underpinnings of Poulenc’s work deepen the authenticity of the character by adding subtext that is difficult to portray in the spoken play. The juxtaposition of the calm patter sections of recitative against the intensely dramatic, emotionally charged sections creates a marked dichotomy of calm and frantic.
What was the preparation and rehearsal process for your performance of the role? Did you approach this role differently than other roles you’ve performed? How involved were you in the directing choices?

Emily Hindrichs: My first performance of this role was a collaboration with a singer-turned-director colleague. We sat down and talked through the whole piece to determine the dramatic arc from start to finish, and also to break the piece into mini-acts (easier for memorization, and, as I was doing the piece without a prompter, gave me a few footholds just in case I had memory slips). The pianist and I would rehearse the mini-acts until they felt like a natural progression—a conversation that progressed at a natural pace, but not so refined that it sounded rehearsed. Once a section was musically sound, Andrew (the director) and I would do scene work, making sure that there were no extraneous parts to the movement. Poulenc’s adaptation of Cocteau is elegant and economic—only the essentials. It was important that we stay true to that.

Camille Zamora: I approach all of my scores first from a text standpoint, learning words and gleaning textual meaning, before delving into the music. This was particularly the case with VOIX. And while I have done various different productions of VOIX, my sense of who Elle is was really seeded in my work with the director who created the first production I was involved in (with Auckland Chamber Orchestra in New Zealand). Raymond Hawthorne, the former Director of the National Opera of New Zealand, was trained as a theater actor, and was relentless in creating a VOIX that was not an “autopilot” version of generic heartbreak. He approached it as a deeply considered, moment-by-moment exploration of Elle’s experience. As an exercise before we even began staging, he had me write all of my lover’s words (as I imagined his side of our conversation) into my score, so that every utterance I had was actually in response to something I was hearing on the line. He stopped me every time he did not believe me: ‘You didn’t really hear him speak to you just now—you’re just singing! I need to really see that you’re hearing him, his every word, before you respond!’ Brilliant.

Both Miss Hindrichs’s and Miss Zamora’s approaches to learning the opera are valuable. Because the role is musically such a difficult one to learn and memorize, it can be very effective to break the piece into smaller parts, such as the phases discussed earlier in this document. In Miss Zamora’s more organic approach, the character is able to come to life as she is able to respond to solid, tangible responses from Monsieur. In preparing and performing the role, it is crucial to create Monsieur’s text in order to convey an honest, realistic conversation.
What freedoms did you feel that this role offered you that others would not?

Emily Hindrichs: We had to decide how dark and manipulative Elle was going to be. Was she already down the rabbit hole, making one last ditch effort to pull her man in with her? Or was she trying to grasp for a handhold to pull herself out? The "empty moments" where her lover responds gave us a lot of liberty to determine the nature of their relationship. Was he an older man, discarding a young trophy, or was it a relationship that had begun in youth/adolescence that he'd outgrown? So many choices!”

Camille Zamora: I am not sure that there are more freedoms offered in this role than in others I do, but I certainly love living with Elle, and find different things in her each time I play her.

These two responses differed more than any others in my interview. I was surprised by Miss Zamora’s answer to this question. I tend to agree with Miss Hindrichs that, because Madame is creating her character, Monsieur’s character, and the nature of their relationship and separation, there are myriad possibilities in approaching the circumstances surrounding the opera.

I haven’t found many performances of the opera performed in the vernacular. Why do you think this is? Is there something innately French about Cocteau’s play or Poulenc’s musical language? It seems that the colloquial, informal speech used in the libretto would make it a suitable piece for translation.

Emily Hindrichs: I'm speculating, but I'd suppose the libretto is still under copyright. Poulenc's other operas were performed in vernacular (Dialogues in Italian, Mamelles in English) but that was during his lifetime and, therefore, with his permission. I do know that the estate is extremely protective of his works, and disinclined to authorize versions that depart from pieces as published.

That said, in an educational situation, one can get away with a lot. The biggest obstacle to French-English translations of the libretto is the text setting - French words and phrases have emphasis on the ends of words and phrases, which doesn't really lend itself to English. One must re-order some of the rhythms for things to make sense in English. If one is a purist, this is a no-no. But if I'm honest, I don't think Poulenc would mind.
Camille Zamora: Great point. I would love to see the work in an effective performance of a great English translation. The most effective performances of this work that I have seen have been French-language performances by artists who are either native French speakers or else fluent in the language – but I don’t think that doing it in French is a non-negotiable. A committed performance of the work could be delivered in any language. That said, supertitles are arguably just as effective, and I personally love singing it in French.

Though the opera is rarely translated, the subject matter is not innately French. In my opinion, the cross-cultural nature of the work would allow for an effective performance in any language, as long as the authentic rhythm of speech and informality of language were maintained in the translation.

Did you use Cocteau’s play as a reference in creating her character? If so, how did Cocteau’s Madame influence your portrayal of Poulenc’s character?

Emily Hindrichs: I did not. I've used literary references for characters before but, in this case, I felt Poulenc and Cocteau had already used their judgment in differentiating the operatic Elle vs. the Elle from the play.

Camille Zamora: I watched/listened to almost all available performances. I found that really helpful, both in terms of seeing what works and also what doesn’t.

In my opinion, it can be beneficial to reference Cocteau’s play. Because many sections were omitted from the opera, it can be useful to see the piece from which Madame’s character is derived. The performer may choose whether or not to use the original play to influence her performance of the role.

Did your Elle kill herself at the end? Why or why not? How did she do it?

Emily Hindrichs: I left it open - she was curled up on a chaise with the cord around her neck. On the last chord, she pulled the string on the lamp and went to black.138

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138 Hindrichs, Emily. Interviewed by Stefanie Anduri. E-mail interview. March 13, 2015.
What was your understanding of the final scene? Does she die of a broken heart? Does she faint? There are so many possible endings to this opera. Renata Scotto over-doses on the sleeping pills; several singers strangle or hang themselves with the telephone chord; others don’t die at all, rather, they live out the rest of their lives, presumably in anguish. Why did you choose to end the way you did?

Camille Zamora: I like to think that after Elle collapses (from the toxic combination of the alcohol, self-medication, and grief coursing through her veins), she eventually comes to, looks at the orchestra, chooses a cute violinist, and heads out to a lovely café In all seriousness, I have never actually felt a need to answer the “what happens to Elle afterward” question – specifically, whether or not she dies. In the opera’s final moments, all Elle is concerned with is putting into her voice, into her VOIX, all of the love that is in her heart. She has only this one moment, and only this one expression, through which to convey all of the love in her heart to someone she will never speak to again. She will never again be touched or touch in the same way she was with him. She will never love or be loved with this level of passion or soul-understanding again. So whether or not she literally expires, she is in fact saying goodbye to love in this moment, to feelings she knows will never be replicated. Her final expression, her final “I love you,” is complete and true and perfectly expressed. In that sense – as her last and best expression, honestly conveyed and truly heard unlike so much that has been said previously – it is a triumph. The effort of it collapses her, like a candle that is blown out.

I was interested to find that neither singer chose to end Madame’s life in the opera’s final scene. Each woman created an environment that allowed the audience to decide the character’s fate.
Ah! No, non. J'ai dîné dehors, Chez Marthe.

Il doit être onze heure un quart.

Tu es chez toi?

Alors regarde la pendule électrique.

C'est ce que je pensais.

Oui, oui, mon chéri.

Hier soir?

Hier soir je me suis couchée tout de suite, et comme je ne pouvais pas m'endormir, j'ai pris un comprimé.

Non,

Un seul,

À neuf heures.

J'avais un peu mal à la tête, mais je me suis secouée.

Marthe est venue. Elle a déjeuné avec moi.

J'ai fait des courses.

Je suis rentrée à la maison.

J'ai... Quoi?

Très forte...

J'ai beaucoup, beaucoup de courage...

Après?

Après je me suis habillée,
Ah! Non, non. J’ai dîné dehors, Chez Marthe.
Il doit être onze heure’un quart.
Tu es chez toi?
Alors regarde la pendule électrique.
C’est ce que je pensais.
Oui, oui, mon chéri.
Hier soir?
Hier soir je me suis couchée tout de suite, et comme je ne pouvais pas m’endormir, j’ai pris un comprimé.
Non, Un seul, À neuf heures.
J’avais un peu mal à la tête, mais je me suis secouée.
Marthe est venue. Elle a déjeuné avec moi.
J’ai fait des courses.
Je suis rentrée à la maison.
J’ai… Quoi?
Très forte…
J’ai beaucoup, beaucoup de courage…
Après?
Après je me suis habillée,

Ah! No, I ate at Martha’s house.
It must be 11:15 A.M.
Are you at home?
Well, look at the electric clock.
That’s what I thought.
Yes, yes, my dear.
Last night?
Last night, I went to bed early, and since I couldn’t fall asleep, I took a sleeping pill.
No,
Only one,
At 9:00.
I had a little headache, but I am feeling better now.
Martha came over. She ate with me.
I ran errands.
I came back to my house.
I… What?
Very strong.
I am very courageous.
After?
After, I got dressed.
Marthe est venue me prendre.
Je rentre de chez elle.
Elle a été parfait.
Elle a cet air, mais ell’ ne l’est pas.
Tu avais raison, comme toujours.
Ma robe rose…
Mon chapeau noir.
Oui, j’ai encore mon chapeau sur la tête.
Et toi, tu rentres?
Tu es resté à la maison?
Quel procès? Ah, oui.
Allô! Chéri…
Si on coupe, redemande-moi tout de suite.
Allô!
Non, je suis là.
Le sac? Tes lettres et les miennes.
Tu peux le fair’prendre quand tu veux.
Un peu dur…
Je comprends.
Oh! Mon chéri, ne t’excuse pas, c’est très naturel et c’est moi qui suis stupide.
Tu es gentil…

Martha came over to get me.
I went back to her house.
It was perfect.
She seems like it, but she isn’t.
You were right, like always.
My pink dress…
My black hat.
Yes, I still have my hat on my head.
And you, did you go out?
You stayed at home?
What’s that? Oh, yes.
Hello! My dear…
If we get cut off, call me back right away.
Hello!
No, I’m here.
The bag? Your letters and mine.
You can come get them whenever you’d like.
A little difficult…
I understand.
Oh, my darling, don’t apologize. It’s very natural. It is I who is stupid.
You are kind.
Tu es gentil.
Moi non plus, je me croyais pas si forte.
Quelle comédie?
Allô! Qui?
Que je te joue la comédie, moi!
Tue me connais, je suis incapable de prendre sur moi.
Pas du tout…
Pas du tout.
Très calme.
Tu l’entendrais.
Je dis: Tu l’entendrais.
Je n’ai pas la voix d’une personne que cache quelque chose.
Non. J’ai décidé d’avoir du courage et j’en aurai.
J’ai ce que je mérite.
J’ai voulu être folle et avoir un bonheur fou.
Chéri, écoute…
Allô! Chéri.
Laisse… Allô!
Laisse-moi parler. Ne t’accuse pas.
Tout est ma faute. Si, si.
You are kind.
I’m not, either. I thought I was very strong.
What games?
Hello! Who?
That I’m playing games? Me?
You know me, I’m incapable of keeping things to myself.
Not at all…
Not at all.
Very calm.
You heard it?
I said: You heard it?
I don’t have the voice of someone who is hiding something.
No. I decided to be courageous, and I am.
I got what I deserve.
I wanted to be wild and happy without abandon.
Darling, listen…
Hello! Darling.
Let… Hello!
Let me speak. Don’t blame yourself.
Everything is my fault. Yes. Yes.
Souviens-toi du dimanche de Versailles et du pneumatique?
Ah! Aahrs!
C’est moi qui ai voulu venir,
C’est moi qui t’ai fermé la bouch’,
C’est moi qui t’ai dit que tout m’était égal.
Non, non, là tu es injuste.
J’ai… J’ai téléphone la première, un mardi,
J’en suis sûr.
Un mardi vingt-sept.
Tu penses bien que je connais ces dates par coeur…
Ta mère? Pourquoi?
Ce n’est vraiment pas la peine.
Je ne sais pas encore.
Oui, peut-être.
Oh! Non, sûrement pas tout de suite, et toi?
Demain? Je ne savais pas que c’était si rapide.
Alore, attends, c’est très simple:
Demain matin le sac sera chez le concierge.
Joseph n’aura qu’à passer le prendre.

Do you remember the Sunday at Versailles with the tire swing?
Oh, well!
It was I who wanted to come,
It was I who shut your mouth
It was I who told you that everything was fine.
No, no, there you were unfair.
I… I called you the first time, a Tuesday,
I am sure of it.
Tuesday, the 27th.
You can be sure that I know these dates by heart…
Your mother? Why?
It’s not really worth it.
I still don’t know why.
Yes, maybe.
Oh, no! Definitely not now. And you?
Tomorrow? I didn’t know that it would be so soon.
Wait, it’s very easy:
Tomorrow morning, the sack will be at the concierge desk.
Joseph will have to come get it.
Oh! Moi, tu sais, il est possible que je reste, comme il est possible que j’aïle passer quelques jour à la campagne.

Chez Marthe.

Oui, mon chéri – mais oui, mon chéri.

Allô!

Et comme ça?

Pourant je parle très fort.

Et là, tu m’entends?

Je dis: et là, tu m’entends?

C’est drôle parce que moi je t’entends comme si tu étais dans la chambre.

Allô! Allô!

Allons, bon! Maintenant c’est moi qui ne t’entends plus.

Si, mais très loin, très loin.

Toi, tu m’entends. C’est chacun son tour.

Non, très bien.

J’entends même mieux que tout à l’heure, mais ton appareil résonne.

On dirait que ce n’est pas ton appareil.

Je te vois, tu sais.

Quel foulard? Le foulard rouge.

Tu as tes manches retroussées.

Ta main gauche? Le récepteur.

Oh! You know, I might stay, but I also might go spend a few days in the country.

At Martha’s house.

Yes, my dear. Oh, yes, my dear.

Hello!

And like that?

And yet, I’m speaking very loudly.

And there, do you hear me?

I said: And there, do you hear me?

That’s funny, because I can hear you as though you were in the same room.

Hello! Hello!

Here we go! Great! Now I’m the one who can’t hear you.

Yes, but very far, very far.

You can hear me. We’re taking turns.

No, very good.

I mean I can hear even better than earlier, but your phone is making a strange ringing sound.

It seems that it is not your phone.

I see you, you know.

Which scarf? The red scarf.

You have your sleeves rolled up.

Your left hand? The receiver.
Ta main droite? Ton stylographe. Your right hand? Your pen.

Tu dessines sur le buvard, des profils, des coeurs, des étoiles. You are drawing on blotting paper, profiles, the hearts, the stars.

Ah! Tu ris! Ah! You’re laughing!

J’ai des yeux à place des oreilles. I have eyes where my ears should be.

Oh! Non, mon chéri, surtout ne me regarde pas. Oh, my darling, above all, don’t look at me.

Peur? Fear?

Non, je n’aurai pas peur… No, I won’t be afraid…

C’est pire. It’s worse.

Enfin je n’ai plus l’habitude de dormer seule. I am still not used to sleeping alone.

Oui, Yes,

Oui, Yes,

Oui, Yes,

Je te promets, je te promets. I promise you. I promise.

Tu es gentil. You are kind.

Je ne sais pas. I don’t know.

J’évite de me regarder. I avoid looking at myself.

Je n’ose plus allumer dans le cabinet de toilette. I don’t dare turn on the bathroom light.

Hier, je me suis trouvé nez à nez avec une vileille dame… Yesterday, I found myself nose-to-nose-with an old woman…

Non, non! Une Vielle dame avec des cheveux blancs et une foule de petites rides. No, no! An old woman with white hair and a bunch of little wrinkles.

Tu es bien bon! You are too good.
Mais, mon chéri, une figure admirable, c’est pire que tout, c’est pour les artistes.

J’aimais mieux quand tu disais: Regardez-moi cette vilaine petite gueule!

Oui, cher Monsieur! Je plaisantais.

Tu es bête…

Heureusement que tu es maladroit et que tu m’aimes.

Si tu ne m’aimais pas et si tu étais adroit, le téléphone deviendrait une arme effrayante.

Une arme qui ne laisse pas de traces, que ne fait pas de bruit.

Moi, méchante? Allô! Allô, chéri… où es-tu?

Allô! Allô, Mad’moisell’,

Allô, Mad’moiselle, on coupe.

Allô, c’est toi? Mais non, Mad’moiselle.

On m’a coupée..

Je ne sais pas…

C’est à dire…

Si, attendez…

Auteuil zero quat’virgul’sept.

Allô!

Pas libre?

Allô, Mad’moisell’, il me redemande’.

But, my dear, an admirable face is worse than anything, it’s only for artists.

I liked it better when you said “look at this ugly little mug.”

Yes, my dear man! I was teasing.

You are ridiculous…

Fortunately, you are maladroit, and you love me.

If you didn’t love me and if you were clever, the phone would become a frightening weapon.

A weapon that leaves no trace, and makes no sound.

Me? Wicked? Hello! Hello, my darling, where are you?

Hello! Hello, Miss,

Hello, Miss, we were cut off.

Hello, is it you? No, Miss.

I was cut off.

I don’t know.

That is to say…

Yes, wait…

Auteuil-zero-four-dash-seven.

Hello!

Not free?

Hello, Miss, he’ll call back.
Bien.
Allô!
Allô! Auteuil zero quat’virgul’sept?
Allô! C’est vous, Joseph?
C’est Madame. On nous avait coupés avec Monsieur.
Pas là?
Oui, oui.
Il ne rentre pas ce soir…
C’est vrai,
Je suis stupide!
Monsieur me téléphone d’un restaurant,
On a coupé et je redémande son numéro…
Excusez-moi, Joseph.
Merci, merci.
Bon soir, Joseph.
Allô! Ah! Chéri! C’est toi?
On avait coupé.
Non, non. J’attendais.
On sonnait, je décrochais et il n’y avait personne.
Sans doute…
Bien sûr…
Tu as sommeil?

Good.
Hello!
Hello! Auteuil-zero-four-dash-seven?
Hello! Is that you, Joseph?
It’s Madame. I was cut off from Monsieur.
He’s not there?
Yes, yes.
He won’t be back home tonight…
It’s true,
I’m stupid!
Monsieur called me from a restaurant,
We were cut off, and I redialed his number.
Excuse me, Joseph.
Thank you, thank you.
Good night, Joseph.
Hello! Oh, darling! Is it you?
We were cut off.
No, no. I waited.
It rang. I picked it up, and no one was there.
No doubt…
Of course…
You’re tired?
Tu es bon d’avoir téléphoné, You are good to have called.

Très bon. Very good.

Non, je suis là. No, I’m here.

Quoi? Pardon, c’est absurd. What? Excuse me, that’s absurd!

Rien, rien, je n’ai rien. Nothing, Nothing is wrong.

Je te jure que je n’ai rien. I swear to you that nothing is wrong.

C’est pareil. It’s the same.


Seulement, tu comprends, on parle, on parle… Only, you know, we’re talking, we’re talking.

Ecoute, mon amour. Je ne t’ai jamais menti. Listen, my love. I have never lied to you.

Oui, je sais, je sais, je te crois, Yes, I know, I know, I believe you.

J’en suis convaincue… I am convinced of it…

Non, ce n’est pas ça, No, it’s not that.

C’est parce que je viens de te mentir. It’s because I just lied to you.

Là, au téléphone, depuis un quart d’heure, je te mens. There, on the phone, about 15 minutes ago, I lied to you.

Je sais bien que je n’ai plus aucune chance à attendre, mais mentir ne porte pas la chance. I know that I have no more luck awaiting me, but lying doesn’t bring luck.

Et puis, je n’aime pas te mentir, je ne peux pas, je ne veux pas te mentir, même pour ton bien. And I don’t like to lie to you, I can’t, I don’t want to lie to you, even if it’s for your own good.

Oh! Rien de grave, mon chéri. Oh, nothing serious, my dear.

Seulement je mentais en te décrivant ma robe et en te disant que j’avais dîné chez Marthe… I only lied in describing my dress and in telling you that I ate with Martha…
Je n’ai pas dîné, je n’ai pas ma robe rose.
J’ai un manteaux sur ma chemise,
Parce qu’à force d’attendre ton téléphone,
À force de regarder l’appareil, de m’asseoir, de me lever, de marcher de long en large,
Je devenais folle!
Alors j’ai mis un manteaux et j’allais sortir,
Prendre un taxi,
Me fair mener sous tes fenêtres, pour attendre…
Eh bien! Attendre, attendre je ne sais quoi.
Tu as raison. Si je t’écoute…
Je serai sage, je répondrai à tout, je te jure.
Ici.
Je n’ai rien mangé.
Je ne pouvais pas.
J’ai été très malade. Hier soir, j’ai voulu prendre un comprimé pour dormer;
Je me suis dit que si j’en prenais plus, je dormirais mieux,
Et que si je les prenais tous, je dormirais sans rêve, sans réveil,

I didn’t eat, and I didn’t have my pink dress.
I have a coat on over my nightshirt.
Because I was expecting your phone call,
By looking at the phone, sitting down, standing up, and pacing the room,
I became crazy!
Well, I put on a coat and was going out,
Taking a taxi,
To stand beneath your windows, to wait…
Well, to wait, to wait for I don’t know what.
You’re right. I hear you.
I will be brave, I will answer every question, I swear it.
Here.
I didn’t eat anything.
I couldn’t.
I was very ill. Last night, I wanted to take a pill to sleep;
I told myself that if I took more, I would sleep better,
And if I took all of them, I would sleep without dreaming, without waking,
Je serais morte.
J’en ai avalé douze dans de l’eau chaude.
Comme une masse.
Et j’ai eu un rêve.
J’ai rêvé ce qui est.
Je me suis réveille toute contente parce que c’était un rêve,
Et quand j’ai su que c’était vrai, que j’étais seule, que je n’avais pas la tête sur ton cou, j’ai senti que je ne pouvais pas vivre.
Légère, légère et froide
Et je ne sentais plus mon coeur battre
Et la mort était longue à venir
Et com’ j’avais une angoisse épouvantable,
Au bout d’une heure j’ai telephone à Marthe.
Je na’vais pas le courag’ de mourir seul.
Chéri… Chéri…
Il était quatre heur’ du matin.
Elle est arrive avec le docteur qui habite son immeuble.
J’avais plus de quarant’.
Le docteur a fait une ordonnance et Marthe est restée jusqu’à ce soir.

I would die.
I took 12 in hot water.
All together.
And I had a dream.
I dreamed of how things really are.
And when I realized it was true, that I was alone, and that I didn’t have my head on your neck, I felt that I couldn’t live anymore.
Light, light and cold.
And I couldn’t feel my heart beating.
And death was long-coming.
And just as I had an intolerable anguish,
After an hour, I called Martha.
I didn’t have the courage to die alone.
Darling… darling…
It was 4:00 A.M.
She came over with the doctor who lives in her building.
I had more than forty.
The doctor wrote a prescription and Martha stayed until this evening.
Je l’ai suppliée de partir parce que tu m’avais dit que tu téléphonerais, et j’avais peur qu’on m’empêche de te parler.

Très, très bien.

Ne t’inquiète pas.

Allô! Je croyais qu’on avait coupé.

Tu es bon, mon chéri. Mon pauvre chéri à qui j’ai fait du mal.

Oui, parle, parle de n’importe quoi.

Je souffrais à me rouler par terre

Et il suffit que tu parles pour que je me sente bien,

Que je ferme les yeux.

Tu sais, quelquefois quand nous étions couchés et que j’avais ma tête à sa petite place contre ta poitrine, j’entendais ta voix, exactement la même que ce soir dans l’appareil.

Allô! J’entends de la musiqu’.

Je dis: j’entends de la musique.

Eh bien, tu devrais cognier au mur

Et empêcher ces voisins de jouer du gramophone à des heure’ pareil’.

C’est inutile.

Du reste. Le docteur de Marthe reviendra demain.

Ne t’inquiète pas.

Mais oui.

I begged her to leave because you told me you would call, and I was afraid she would prevent me from talking to you.

Very, very well.

Don’t worry.

Hello! I thought we had been cut off.

You are good, my darling. My poor darling, to whom I was cruel.

Yes, speak about whatever you’d like.

I suffered so much, I was rolling on the ground.

And it only took your speaking to me for me to feel well.

That I close my eyes.

You know, sometimes when we were In bed, and I had my head in that little place against your chest, I heard your voice, exactly as I hear it tonight on the phone.

Hello! I hear music.

I said: I hear music.

Well, you should pound on the wall.

And stop those neighbors from playing their gramophone at this hour.

It’s useless.

Some rest. Martha’s doctor will come back tomorrow.

Don’t worry.

Yes.
Elle te donnera des nouvelles.

Quoi?

Oh! Si, mil’fois mieux.

Si tu n’avais pas appelé,

Je serais morte.

Pardonne-moi.

Je sais que cette scène est intolérable et que tu as bien de la patience, mais comprends-moi, je souffre, je souffre.

Ce fil, c’est le dernier qui me rattache encore à nous.

Avant-hier soir? J’ai dormi.

Je m’étais couchée avec le telephone…

Non, non.

Dans mon lit.

Oui. Je sais. Je suis très ridicule,

Mais j’avais le telephone dans mon lit et malgré tout, on est relié par le telephone.

Parce que tu me parles.

Voilà cinq ans que je vis de toi,

Que tu es mon seul air respirable,

Que je passé mon temps à t’attendre,

À te croir’ mort si tu es en retard, à mourir de te croir’ mort, à revivre quand tu entres,

She will give you news.

What?

Oh, yes! A thousand times better.

If you hadn’t called,

I would have died.

Excuse me.

I know that this outburst is unbearable, and that you have been so patient, but understand me, I am suffering.

This is the final thread that binds me to us.

The night before last? I slept.

I went to bed with the telephone.

No, no.

In my bed.

Yes, I know, I am ridiculous.

But I had the phone in my bed, and despite everything, we were connected by the telephone.

Because you are speaking to me.

For the five years, we were together,

That you were the air I breathed,

That I spent my time waiting for you,

That I thought you were dead if you were late, that the thought of your death killed me, and your return revived me,
Et quand tu es là, enfin, à mourir de peur que tu partes.
Maintenant j’ai de l’air parce que tu me parles.
C’est entendu, mon amour; j’ai dormi parce que c’était la première fois.
Le premier soir on dort.
Ce qu’on ne supporte pas c’est la seconde nuit, hier, et la troisième, demain.
Et des jours et des jours à faire quoi, mon Dieu?
Et… et en admettant que je dorme,
Après le sommeil il y a les rêves
Et le réveil
Et manger
Et se lever
Et se laver
Et sortir
Et aller où?
Mais, mon pauvre chéri, je n’ai jamais eu rien d’autre à faire que toi.
Marthe a sa vie organisée.
Seule.
Voilà deux jours qu’il ne quitte pas l’anti-chambre.

And when you were there, to die of fear that you would leave again.
Now, I can breathe because you are speaking to me.
It is understood, my love; I slept because it was the first time.
The first night, I slept.
That which I can’t endure is the second night, yesterday, and the third, tomorrow.
And days and days of doing what, my God?
And… and in admitting that I sleep,
After sleep, there are dreams.
And waking up
And eating
And getting up
And getting washed
And going out
And going where?
But, my poor darling, je never had anything to do besides you
Matha has her life planned.
Alone
It’s been two days, and he won’t leave the entryway.
J’ai voulu l’appeler, le caresser. 
Il refuse qu’on le touche 
Un peu plus, il me mordrait. 
Oui, moi!
Je te jure qu’il m’effraye. 
Il ne mange plus. 
Il ne bouge plus. 
Et quand il me regarde, il me donne la chair de pou’.
Comment veux-tu que je sache? 
Il croit peut-être que je t’ai fait du mal…
Pauvre bête! Je n’ai aucune raison de lui en vouloir. 
Je ne le comprends que trop bien. 
Il t’aime. 
Il ne te voit plus rentrer. 
Il croit que c’est ma faute. 
Oui, mon chéri. C’est entendu; 
Mais c’est un chien. 
Malgré son intelligence, il ne peut pas le deviner. 
Mais, je ne sais pas, mon chéri 
Comment veux-tu que je sache? 
On n’est plus soi-même.

I have wanted to call him, to pet him. 
He refuses for anyone to touch him. 
Anymore, and he would bite me. 
Yes, me!
I swear to you that he frightens me. 
He won’t eat anymore. 
He won’t move anymore. 
And when he looks at me, it gives me goosebumps. 
How am I supposed to know? 
Maybe he thinks I did something awful to you… 
Poor beast! I don’t have any reason to blame him. 
I understand it all too well. 
He loves you. 
He doesn’t see you coming back anymore. 
He thinks it’s my fault. 
Yes, my dear. It’s understood. 
But he’s a dog. 
Despite his intelligence, he can’t grasp it. 
I don’t know, my darling. 
How should I know? 
He’s not himself anymore.
Songe que j’ai déchiré tout le paquet de mes photographies

Do you believe that I tore my entire collection of pictures?

D’un seul coup, sans m’en apercevoir.

Suddenly, without noticing.

Même pour un homme ce serait un tour de force.

Even for a man, this would be a tour-de-force.

Allô! Allô! Madam’, retirez-vous!

Hello! Hello! Madame, hang up!

Vous êtes avec des abonnés. Allô! Mais non, Madam’

We are on the phone. Hello! Non, Madame.

Mais Madame, nous ne cherchons pas à être intéressants.

But Madame, we’re not trying to be interesting.

Si vous nous trouvez ridicules, pourquoi perdez-vous votre temps au lieu de raccrocher?

If you think we’re ridiculous, why are you taking your time to hang up?

Oh! Ne te fâche pas…

Oh! Don’t be mad…

Enfin!

Finally!

Non, non. Elle a raccroché après avoir dit cette chose ignoble.

No, no. She hung up after saying that awful thing.

Tu as l’air frappé,

You seem surprised.

Si, tu es frappé, je connais ta voix.

Yes, you are surprised, I know your voice.

Mais, mon chéri, cette femme doit être très mal

But, my darling, this woman must have been very bad.

Et elle ne te connaît pas.

And she doesn’t know you.

Elle croit que tu es comme les autres hommes.

She thinks you are like other men.

Mais non, mon chéri, ce n’est pas du tout pareil.

But no, my dear, it isn’t at all so.

Pour les gens, on s’aime ou on se déteste.

You know how people are, you either love them or hate them.

Les ruptures sont des ruptures.

Break-ups are break-ups.
Ils regardent vite.
Tu ne leur feras jamais comprendre…
Tu ne leur feras jamais comprendre certaines choses.
Le mieux est de faire comme moi et de s’en moquer complètement.
Oh!
Rien.
Je crois que nous parlons comme d’habitude et puis tout a coup la vérité me revient.
Dans le temps, on se voyait.
On pouvait perdre la tête, oublier ses promesses, risquer l’impossible, convaincre ceux qu’on adorait en les embrassant, en s’accrochant à eux.
Un regard pouvait changer tout.
Mais avec cet appareil, ce qui est fini est fini.
Sois tranquille.
On ne se suicide pas deux fois.
Je ne saurais pas acheter un revolver…
Tu ne me vois pas achetant un revolver.
Où trouverais-je la force de combiner un mensonge, mon pauvre adoré?
Aucune…

They glance.
You’ll never make them understand...
You’ll never make them understand certain things.
The best thing to do is to be like me, and completely stop caring.
Oh!
Nothing.
I keep thinking we’re talking like normal, and then all of a sudden, the truth comes back to me.
In time, we’ll see.
You could lose your head, forget the promises, risk the impossible, convince those you love and embrace them, clinging to them.
A glance could change everything.
But with the phone, that which is finished, is finished.
Be calm.
No one commits suicide twice.
I don’t know how to buy a gun.
You won’t see me buying a gun.
Where would I find the strength to lie, my love?
Not one…
J’aurais dû avoir du courage. Il y a des circonstances où le mensonge est utile.

Toi, si tu me mentais pour render la separation moins pénible…

Je ne dis pas que tu mentes.

Je dis: si tu mentais et que je le sache.

Si, par exemple, tu n’étais pas chez toi, et que tu me dises…

Non, non, mon chéri! Ecoute…

Je te crois.

Si, tu prends une voix méchante.

Je disais simplement que si tu me trompais par bonté d’âme et que je m’en aperçoive, je n’en aurais que plus de tendresse pour toi.

Allô! Allô!

Mon Dieu, fait’ qu’il redemande.

Mon Dieu, fait’ qu’il redemande.

Mon Dieu, fait’ qu’il redemande.

Mon Dieu, fait’ qu’il redemande.

Mon Dieu, fait’

On avait coupé.

J’étais en train de te dire que si tu me mentais par bonté, et que je m’en aperçoive, je n’en aurais que plus de tendresse pour toi.

Bien sûr…

I will have to have courage. There are circumstances in which lies are useful.

You, if you lied to me in order to make our break up less painful…

I’m not saying that you lied.

I said if you lied and I found out.

If, for example, you weren’t at home, and you had said…

No, no, my darling! Listen…

I believe you.

Yes, your voice is becoming callous.

I simply said that if you lied to me out of the goodness of your heart, and I found out, I would feel even more affection for you.

Hello! Hello!

My God, make him call again.

My God, make him call again.

My God, make him call again.

My God, make him call again.

My God, make…

We were disconnected.

I was just saying that if you lied to me to protect me, and I found out, I would feel even more affection for you.

Of course…
Tu es fou!

Mon amour –

Mon cher amour.

Je sais bien qu’il le faut, mais c’est atroce.

Jamais je n’aurais ce courage.

Oui.

On a l’illusion d’être l’un contre l’autre

Et brusquement on met des caves, des égouts, toute une ville entre soi.

J’ai le fil autour de mon cou.

J’ai ta voix autour de mon cou.

Ta voix autour de mon cou.

Il faudrait que le bureau nous coupe par hasard.

Oh! Mon chéri!

Comment peux-tu imaginer que je pense une chose si laide?

Je sais bien que cette opération est encore plus cruelle à faire de ton côté que du mien…

Non…

Non…

A Marseill’?

Ecoute, chéri,

Puisque vous serez à Marseill’ après demain soir,

You’re crazy!

My love -

My dear love.

I know that we must, but it’s dreadful.

I will never be strong enough.

Yes.

It seems to be one against the other.

And we suddenly put basements, sewers, an entire city between us.

I have the telephone cord around my neck.

I have your voice around my neck.

Your voice around my neck.

The operator must disconnect us accidentally.

Oh! My darling!

How could you dream that I would think such a terrible thing?

I know well that this situation is even more difficult from your side than from mine…

Non…

Non…

In Marseille?

Listen, darling,

If you will be in Marseille after tomorrow night,
Je voudrais… enfin j’aimerais…

J’aimerais que tu ne descèdes pas à l’hôtel où nous descendons d’habitude.

Tu n’es pas fâché?

Parce que les choses que je ne imagine pas n’existent pas, ou bien, elles existent dans une espèce de lieu très vague, et qui fait moins de mal…

Tu comprends?
Merci…
Merci.
Tu es bon.
Je t’aime.
Alors, voilà.
J’allais dire machinalement.
À tout de suite.
J’en doute.
Oh!
C’est mieux.
Beaucoup mieux.
Mon chéri…
Mon beau chéri.
Je suis forte.
Dépêche-toi.
Vas-y.

I would like… actually, I would love…

I would love if you would not stay in the hotel where we always stayed.

You’re not mad?

Because the things I don’t imagine, don’t exist, or at least, they exist in a sort of vague place, which is less painful…

You understand?
Thank you…
Thank you…
You are kind.
I love you.
There it is.
I say it automatically.
Suddenly.
I doubt it.
Oh!
It’s better.
Much better.
My darling…
My handsome darling…
I am strong.
Hurry!
Go!
Coupe! Coupe vite!  Hang up! Hang up quickly!

Je t'aime,  I love you,

Je t'aime,  I love you,

Je t'aime,  I love you,

Je t'aime,  I love you,

Je taime.  I love you.
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