

Literature as Struggle: Variations on "The Death of the Author"

Elisabeth Todd

"We know," Roland Barthes concludes in his essay "The Death of the Author," "that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (1326). This myth, he states earlier, is a modern one, engendering the figure of the "Author-God" with its biographically endorsed single message, and whose divinity restricts the text (Barthes 1324). But before toppling the "Author-God," the focus must be kept on the word "modern," from which can be gathered a fugue of ambiguity: undoubtedly, Barthes cites Mallarmé, Valéry, and Proust who, as figures in their own right, attempt apostasy of their status as authors. But "modern" will be taken to mean more than just a phenomenon including the three cited authors; it will, after a reading of Paul de Man, be a dialectic and a paradox whose implications will affect those of Barthes' essay. For de Man, modernity and literature are inextricably linked in such a way that the paradoxical struggle of the former can be seen as a reflection of another struggle inherent in the latter. The attempted renewal of the present by rupturing the past brings a further dependence on anteriority, and consequently "[t]he distinctive character of literature thus becomes manifest as an inability to escape from a condition that is felt to be unbearable" (de Man 162). In other words, literature is conditional upon the presence of a struggle, and de Man proposes the temporal paradox of modernity as something that fulfills this criterion. Yet, Barthes' own proposition of the death of the author, in attempting to escape all temporality, seems also to efface any possible struggle, which would result in a literary void. Ultimately, however, there is a second figure, whose presence creates a self-renewing tension that fills the void and reestablishes literature: the reader. Barthes' death of the author is not a temporally singular event, but rather an eternal struggle between writer and reader that provides the text with its general literarity. The eternal death of the author and birth of the reader, then, allows literature to exist.

The paradox inherent in modernity, according to Paul de Man in "Literary History and Literary Modernity," lies in its temporality and in its desire to seek a total present that, far from providing temporal stability, will create a dependence on the past it tries so hard to get

rid of. “Modernity invests its truth in the power of the present moment as an origin,” de Man writes, “but discovers that, in severing itself from the past, it has at the same time severed itself from the present” (149). This quest for what de Man terms the “true present” is taken to be illusory and not an escape from temporality as it appears to promise at first glance (148). This true present is not to be understood as an eternal present, in which case a rupture from the past would be of no consequence, but rather as a departure and as an assertion of forward motion. Modernity’s contradiction then, can be seen as movement from a point of departure that is constantly being replaced in order to deny any anteriority. If, in Proust, who is given by Barthes as a counterpoint who attempts to break the authorial sway, “the novel ends when writing at last becomes possible” (Barthes 1323), then we are broken off at the point of departure, at the present moment, when the past of the *récit* is substituted for the “true present” of new writing. De Man’s words echo here, revealing the problematic nature of this rupture: this new writing is not the redefinition of the author, but an illusory crusade trapped in the very house of mirrors that is modernity.

This illusion of the present moment is then literary in a general sense. De Man sees in literature the very paradox of modernity that he (and others – he cites Nietzsche, for instance) have perceived. De Man writes:

On the one hand, literature has a constitutive affinity with action, with the unmediated, free act that knows no past ... The historian ... can remain quite remote from the collective acts he records; his language and the events that the language denotes are clearly distinct entities. But the writer’s language is to some degree the product of his own action; he is both the historian and the agent of his own language. (151-52)

This is indicative of the grand temptation of the present and of immediacy that haunts the work of the author. Proust, “instead of putting his life into his novel, as is so often maintained ... made of his very life a work for which his own book was the model” (Barthes 1323). This act, on the other hand, is the historian-agent’s paradoxical rejection of the past for the present about which de Man writes: “No true account of literary language can bypass this persistent temptation of immediacy to fulfill itself in a single moment” (152). To take another example of an author cited by Barthes, Mallarmé “was doubtless the first to see and to foresee in its full

extent the necessity to substitute language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner” (Barthes 1323). While Mallarmé’s modernity is not at odds with the one proposed in de Man’s essay, the question of language here makes the association less clear-cut. Ownership of language – or otherwise, the very state of the historian-agent’s subject – can be seen as the ownership of narrative that holds the subject in a modern temporal bind, as it did in the example of Proust. However, Mallarmé’s rejection of this very ownership, or allowing language to speak, can be seen as a rejection well within the boundaries of de Man’s proposed modern quest for the true present. If one is to speak, experience and biography enter as restricting agents; if language speaks, it is in the unrestricted present that is continually haunted by the specter of its point of departure, the moment of the release of its ownership. Therefore, as de Man writes, “the writer remains so closely involved with action that he can never free himself of the temptation to destroy whatever stands between him and his deed, especially the temporal distance that makes him dependent on an earlier past” (152).

Even the rejection of the ownership of language proposed by Mallarmé and cited by Barthes seems, then, to be held captive by the paradox of modernity, though the example is much closer to an escape than the one Proust provides. Furthermore, their attempted renunciation of authorial status fails when they are considered as singular subjects; indeed, Barthes writes, “The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and *after*” (1324). This diachronic model is subject to the dialectic of the past and the present in de Man’s conception of the modern author, and therefore fits squarely in the proposed model of literature as a struggle. The modern *scriptor*, on the other hand, “is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate” (Barthes 1324). But here is a concept of the writer stripped of any dialectic. Barthes’ *scriptor*, modern as proposed, claims to have achieved the eternal present, and has therefore escaped the modern, eternal friction between the before and the after. Barthes’ *scriptor* escapes all temporality; the text, therefore, does as well. While the definition of Barthes’ proposed *scriptor* is not perfectly novel, there is an essential difference in its approach to the question of time. Charles Baudelaire, for example, in a proposition that Paul de Man shows to be close to Nietzsche, states in “Le peintre de la vie moderne,” “By

plunging into the past [one] may well lose the *memory of the present*. He abdicates the values and privileges provided by actual circumstance, for almost all our originality stems from the stamp that time prints on our sensations” (156-57). This manifestly refuses the diachronic model of the text and author that Barthes also refuses in his essay: the line divided into the before and the after that dissipates alongside memory (1324). Baudelaire, before Barthes, here then recognizes the danger that the writer’s consciousness of his own anteriority imposes on the text. This will, ultimately, reveal an essential struggle. For as de Man then observes, “The same temporal ambivalence prompts Baudelaire to couple any evocation of the present with terms such as ‘représentation’, ‘mémoire’, or even ‘temps’, all opening perspectives of distance and difference within the apparent uniqueness of the instant” (157). The pull of one’s anteriority is ineluctable, rendering Baudelaire’s modernity difficult. To compare with Barthes’ modern scriptor, then, the beginning of “The Death of the Author” returns as if an echo: “writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space...the negative where all identity is lost” (Barthes 1322). Furthermore, “there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*” (1324). The vestiges of Baudelaire are evident; de Man, to give insight, cites his “essential ‘present-ness’” of a present from which pleasure of its representation is derived (156). Yet Barthes, craftily, seems to avoid evoking any bit of anteriority, and his writing destroys any potential point of origin with one sole word: eternally. What separates Barthes’ propositions from Baudelaire’s – and even from those of his examples of Mallarmé and Proust – is not the denial or destruction of the past, then, but a transcendence of temporality.

Yet in this very transcendence there is no struggle that can provide a definition of literature. De Man, discussing Baudelaire once more, provides another example of a struggle that relies on temporality: “As soon as Baudelaire has to replace the single instant of invention ... by the successive movement that involves at least two distinct moments, he enters into a world that assumes ... an interdependence between past and future that prevents any present from ever coming into being” (161). This “single instant of invention,” contrapuntally related to Baudelaire, approximates Barthes’ proposed modern scriptor, with one difference: in Barthes, there is no single instant, but one that eternally renews itself into an orchestral multiplicity. If the dialectic of modernity involves an effacing of the past that brings it ever

closer; and, if the death of the author is not a strictly modern phenomenon, due to its attempt to transcend the past rather than rupture with it, what, then, is it? If literature is an inherently dialectical and modern phenomenon, then how can the death of the author be anything literary? Barthes' appellation "scriptor" seems indeed to be stripped of any literary charge, unlike the term "author," whose connotations of "authority" seem to be inextricably linked to the very idea of modern literature. Otherwise stated, de Man's modern dialectic provides a struggle that allows literature to take shape as such; literarity in its general sense evolves from the inevitable conflict between present and past. This would allow no room for literarity in Barthes' propositions, given their transcendence of any temporal friction. There is no struggle in what is eternally present. Barthes makes no excuses for the death of the author and the death of literarity; he claims, rather, "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (1325). From this, along with de Man's thesis on modernity and literature, one gathers that Barthes is inadvertently tying modern literature and its very literarity to the Author-God figure.

Up until now, however, the readings of Barthes and of de Man have been one-sided. The latter author admits that his proposed struggle is evident "at least as long as we consider it from the point of view of the writer as subject" (de Man 162); as for the former, "The Death of the Author," as the title of Barthes' essay and as a concept, includes only the single authorial personage and its fall. In other words, what is missing is the reader, and the conclusion of Barthes' essay brings this figure into play. "[W]e know," Barthes perorates, "that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (1326). "The myth" refers to the Author-God figure at the expense of the reader, but if it is to be overthrown, literature would enter into a crisis. If read closely, however, the above sentence reveals through its syntax that Barthes has actually not inadvertently linked the author to literature, and rather that he has waited until this point to introduce the reader because he is aware that the death of the author cannot stand on its own. "To give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth" (Barthes 1326) – the inclusion of both the reader and the author in this word "myth" (the preceding sentence, serving as the antecedent, states, "Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader") is key: the future of writing, then, is not found in the one-sided toppling of the Author-God;

the second figure of the reader must be present, and the myth of its exclusion must be overthrown. And this future of writing is indeed the preservation of literature. In other words, Barthes wants to substitute the modern, dialectical literature – dependent on de Man’s temporal struggle, dependent on the single figure of the author – for another literature, one that transcends temporality and is dependent on the two figures of the writer and the reader. Without the presence of the reader, the death of the author as such would leave a literary void. Then, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes 1326). The reading of this clause, when isolated, proposes that the death precedes the birth, and that the reader is born into the void following. As has been read earlier, the author stands in a diachronic relation with the text; its death, therefore, seems to want to be taken as a temporally singular event.

Yet, the birth of the reader, on the other hand, is not a singular event; it eternally renews itself. The final clause stating that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” then takes on a different reading (Barthes 1326). This multiplicity has already revealed itself earlier on in Barthes’ essay: in contrast to the diachronic author, Barthes proposes that “the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text...there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*” (1324). Here at the end of the essay, then, it follows that every text is eternally *read* here and now. The eternal present of the enunciation becomes the eternal present of the reading, and the reader becomes renewed into this true presence with its every instance. In order to accomplish this, however, the figure of the author must suffer an eternally renewed death; each birth of the reader corresponds to its own death of the author, for as stated earlier, the reader’s coming into the world comes at the cost of the author’s exit. And therein lies the key. De Man’s temporal struggle of modern literature has been substituted with the *eternal struggle* between the author and the reader of Barthes’ literature. The struggle reinstated, literarity can now safely exist after the consequences of “The Death of the Author.”

Barthes, preceding his introduction of the reader figure, states, “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (1325). This sentence, as introduced earlier, is indicative of literature before its separation with the Author-God figure. It follows, then, that the eternal death of the author will open the text,

reinstates its polyphony, and free it from the tyranny of intent. The reader, then, becomes “the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (Barthes 1325). Furthermore, in keeping with the text’s and reader’s transcendence of temporality, “the reader is without history, biography, psychology” (1325). While the eternal death of the author and the birth of the reader creates literature, it has yet to be answered or even considered just what the resulting text is, and what its literary nature entails. The open and unlimited text that Barthes proposes is satisfying to an extent; in it is certainly found the reader’s liberty and power. The death of the author has also been taken as a given, implying that the reader, despite the eternal struggle, will always land the killing blow over and over again. However, the beauty of literature as a struggle lies not in the promise of victory, but in the potential for defeat. Literarity is a struggle and a gamble; both the author and the reader, after Barthes’ and de Man’s essays, put their lives on the line, and their combat smudges any transparent reading. As such, the nature of the text is not easily definable. Not every text, not every author, will surrender itself so easily to the reader. Nor will every reader subject itself to the tyranny of the chosen signified, breaking through the lines of the text to find new readings, new structures, and new realities. Yet, this very struggle between death and birth – between author and reader – will always exist, and with it, invariably, literature.

Works Cited

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