Maurice Blanchot: Saboteur of the Writers' War

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On 6 February 1945, a date significant for being the eleventh anniversary of the violent emergence of the French fascist Right at the Place de la Concorde, the French novelist and journalist Robert Brasillach was executed for "intelligence with the enemy" largely on the basis of articles he wrote while the editor of a right wing newspaper during the Occupation. The two major responses to his execution in the French literary community were condemnation and celebration. In petitions and manifestos his fellow writers variously decried it as a violation of the writer's sacred freedom of speech or exalted it as an example of the righteous justice of France purging itself of those who had ignominiously been its betrayers. While these were the predictable responses of a French intelligentsia given to the vocal proclamation of political commitments, there was a third response to Brasillach's execution that was more difficult to grasp. As the newly formed provisional French republic staged the execution of an author in order to found itself anew with a patrimony untainted by political or intellectual collaboration, the literary critics Maurice Blanchot and Roland Barthes appropriated this death and turned it inside out to articulate the theory of the death of the author.

Maurice Blanchot was a prominent literary critic after World War II, and his theories anticipated many of the innovations that would occur later in structuralism and post-structuralism. No less a post-structuralist authority than Michel Foucault once said in an interview that "Blanchot made possible all discourse about

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This claim seems less hyperbolic upon review of one of the major statements from the French discourse about literature: Roland Barthes' renowned essay, "The Death of the Author." Based in structuralist semiotics, the idea developed here was that literature was legible only when understood apart from the biography and psychology of the author, free from speculation about motives and intentions. A text strongly reminiscent of Blanchot's style of thought, "The Death of the Author" appears as his direct genealogical descendent when read in juxtaposition with his first major statement of literary theory, "Literature and the Right to Death," first published in 1947. In this early essay Blanchot articulated a nascent form of the idea that Barthes later popularized as the death of the author. Blanchot's early idea directly influenced Barthes' later iteration, and the relationship between these two key texts raises a crucial question: why is it the death of the author? Why not the absence, removal, or disappearance of the author? Why death specifically, and not something less violent?

Although this question appears limited to literary theory at first, it opens into French history when one considers that Blanchot's "Literature and the Right to Death" was published immediately after the Liberation and the postwar purge of collaborators. Most scholars link Barthes' death of the author to the period of the late 1960s when Foucault pronounced the death of Man in The Order of Things. They see the political...
significance of the death of the author reflected in the events of May 1968. Yet the death of the author had a deeper history and political significance that go back to the Liberation, the postwar purge, and the execution of Robert Brasillach.

This history was part of the larger contest over French national identity during the postwar reconstruction. Following the Liberation in 1944, Charles de Gaulle returned to France and quickly installed a provisional government, proclaiming that the "Republic has never ceased to exist." De Gaulle's assertion of continuity contained the promise of a new beginning, and a sense of possibility bordering on the revolutionary seized the populace. But this euphoria was accompanied by a wave of denunciations known as the purge that was eerily reminiscent of the Reign of Terror. Thousands of accused collaborators were executed, imprisoned, or publicly humiliated in trials of varying legality.

The French literary community participated in the purge, convening a national writers' committee (the Comité national des écrivains or CNE) for the purpose of identifying and punishing writers and intellectuals who collaborated with the German occupation and the Vichy regime. The "writers' war," as Gisèle Sapiro has termed it, was a passionate debate between the CNE and those who defended the collaborators. It was an ideological battle, fought along baldly partisan lines, in which both sides believed that the fate of the nation was at stake insofar as the French intellectual had been the self-appointed guardian of the national spirit ever since the Dreyfus Affair. Motivated by communist politics and made up of members of the French Communist Party, the CNE saw the Liberation as an opportunity to remake France according to its vision of a socialist community. The committee carried out this plan by assembling a blacklist of writers who had collaborated or had collaborationist sympathies, censoring their works, and in cases such as Louis-

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Ferdinand Céline, forcing them into exile. The CNE published its blacklist in September 1944, and within a month writers and journalists began appearing at the Paris Court of Justice on charges of treason. Brasillach was the first collaborator named. Though the CNE was not directly responsible for his trial and execution, the same spirit of the purge linked the writers' committee and the court.\footnote{Kaplan, 192.}

The collaborators were defended by a wide swath of literary society with an equally wide variety of motives. François Mauriac, the novelist, resistant, and former member of the CNE, drafted a petition requesting the commutation of Brasillach's death sentence. Mauriac was moved to compassion by Brasillach's considerable literary talents and reasoned that they outweighed his political journalism. Albert Camus signed, despite sincere reservations, out of unwillingness to be party to any person's legal execution, even by abstention. The surrealist poet and filmmaker Jean Cocteau signed out of anger at the provisional government's presumption that it was a legitimate legal practice to kill writers. This last was the primary concern articulated in the text of the petition itself as well as the general mood of the large segment of the French literary community that opposed the execution. The petition, however, was denied, and Brasillach was executed within three weeks of his trial.

Other writers were put on trial and executed, but Brasillach was exceptional. He was the only one of any real literary distinction, but, perhaps more importantly, he was a graduate of the École normale supérieure and so a member of the intellectual aristocracy of France. His execution was more than just the literal death of the man most responsible for ushering the spirit of National Socialism into France. As Alice Kaplan has noted, the "Brasillach death sentence reinforced the seriousness of the written word at a time when France needed to rebuild its intellectual elite."\footnote{Ibid., 229.} Simone de Beauvoir was present at the trial, which inspired her meditation on the morality and purpose of the...
purge, titled "Eye for an Eye." The lesson she took from the trial was far more ambiguous than her choice of title indicates, and she condemns the method of judgment imposed on Brasillach, though she supported the judgment itself. Jean-Paul Sartre took a less ambivalent position in his manifesto for the purge, "What Is a Collaborator?" This essay consisted primarily of an analysis of Brasillach's writing and made its point about collaboration by drawing an analogy between the French fascist writer's philosophical collaboration and the French woman's sexual collaboration. In Sartre's rendition, the collaborating intellectual played the role of seductress whose treason came in her copulation with the foreign, by prostituting French national spirit to invading German thought. Both the sexual collaborator and the intellectual collaborator were guilty of illegal intercourse, and both required bodily discipline. The sexual collaborator must submit to the public humiliation of having her head shaved, and the intellectual collaborator must submit to corporal punishment. For Beauvoir and Sartre, as for the entire French nation, Brasillach's trial was a coda on the responsibility of writers.

Even after the period of open hostility between the two camps subsided, there continued to be a cold writers' war, only now intellectuals embedded their respective positions in works of literary theory instead of blazoning them explicitly on blacklists and petitions. During this moment literary criticism experienced a remarkable efflorescence, and it was written with all the feverish intensity of incipient revolution. This was the occasion for Sartre's famous essay "What Is Literature?" which proposed that the true test of literature was its political commitment, a theory that grew directly out of the purge and the writers' war. Here Sartre drew a distinction between prose and

poetry. Prose, Sartre felt, addressed the reader and the world concretely and directly, while poetry distanced the writer from his worldly situation by its involvement with abstract and figural language. In prose the writer could commit to the world and hence to human freedom, which was the only responsible course after World War II. Poetry, on the other hand, could only ever address the self-indulgence of the poet. Sartre's most visible combatant was Jean Paulhan, editor of *La Nouvelle Revue française* before the war and former member of the resistance. Paulhan took the aesthete's view, denying that literature had anything to do with politics. Instead, literature

should remain a place – however narrow, and however modest – where men and words can be cleansed of the filth accumulated through years of war, occupation, and deliverance. Where "peace" still means peace. Where by "literature" and even "poetry" people mean what decent people have always meant: not necessarily arguments in support of an ethical position or thesis (however attractive) but works capable of affording us a certain revelation, a certain pleasure.¹³

Paulhan's aesthetic position represents the antipode of Sartre's political commitment.

Blanchot's "Literature and the Right to Death" detonated both Sartre and Paulhan's positions. Others have already pointed out that Blanchot's essay was a thinly veiled allegory of the CNE's blacklisting of writers and intellectuals through an analysis of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror.¹⁴ But "Literature and the Right to Death" was much more than an allegory of the purge. It constituted a positive challenge to the intellectual assumptions that underlay the arguments put forth on


both sides of the writers’ war. Blanchot appropriated and internalized the postwar purge in order to articulate an alternative vision of French community through literary theory. This was an act of intellectual sabotage, itself as revolutionary and violent as the death that it heralded. When Barthes assumed the idea and rechristened it as the death of the author, he extended the idea’s political force beyond the immediate context of France to the general principle of legal sovereignty. Born in violence, the theory of the death of the author retains its violence in Barthes’ subsequent iteration but with the paradoxical purpose of removing violence from the world.

Blanchot was born in the rural town of Quain, in the Saône-et-Loire, in 1907 and was educated at the University of Strasbourg. There his friend Emmanuel Levinas exposed him to the work of the German existentialist Martin Heidegger, who was to have a lasting influence on Blanchot’s thought. During the 1930s Blanchot worked in Paris as a journalist. He was part of the generation of intellectuals disaffected with the Popular Front, the “non-conformists of the 30s,” and he authored nationalist and even anti-Semitic editorials. After World War II, however, Blanchot turned to professional literary criticism, and he published essays and reviews in journals such as Les Temps modernes, La Nouvelle Revue française, and Critiques at the consistent rate of one per month from 1947 to 1969. These essays bore the traces of Blanchot’s early encounter with Heidegger and were distinct from most contemporary criticism for their philosophical style and logic. At the same time Blanchot wrote novels in the elliptical and oblique style of Samuel Beckett that advanced his theoretical program in literature. Politically, Blanchot began to speak out increasingly on the Left, first during the Algerian War of Independence and later during May 1968. Despite his political visibility, Blanchot never held a university post and disavowed public appearances, preferring that his texts speak for themselves.

Roland Barthes followed a similar path. Born in Cherbourg in 1915, Barthes spent his childhood in Bayonne. Instead of pursuing a university career at first, Barthes wrote professional literary and cultural criticism, which eventually provided the material for his famous analysis of French popular culture, *Mythologies.* After a period of funding himself through grants at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique, Barthes finally found a university position at the École pratique des hautes études in 1960, and, with the support of Foucault, he ascended to the Collège de France in 1976. Barthes began his career as a Marxist and Sartrean but abandoned those positions quickly for the semiotic approach that he would develop into one of the major currents of postwar French thought.

Although Blanchot and Barthes may never have met, their intellectual trajectories placed them in close proximity early on. They were joined in distaste for Sartre's "What is Literature?" As Blanchot dedicated his first major work of literary theory, "Literature and the Right to Death," to refuting Sartre's claims, so too did Barthes attempt to deal with the problem of literature and commitment in his own first book, *Writing Degree Zero,* published in 1953. Blanchot's influence on the latter work is explicit: Blanchot's name appears alongside those of Camus and Jean Cayrol as an exemplar of the zero degree of writing where literature turns neutral and colorless. Stronger still are the implicit references to Blanchot's theoretical ideas that occur in the opening paragraphs of *Writing Degree Zero.* Barthes' consistent references to the Orpheus myth dovetail neatly with Blanchot's publication of "The Gaze of Orpheus" in which he used the mythological figure as a platform to explore how the writer creates literature. More significant in the present context, however, was Barthes' discussion of a writer's execution during

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the Reign of Terror, which was an implicit reference to Blanchot's intervention in the writers' war. The death of the author thus has a history that runs from Blanchot's work through Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero* and that culminates rather than begins with "The Death of the Author."

Blanchot's "Literature and the Right to Death" was a direct challenge to Sartre's assertion that prose is the language of commitment and poetry the language of abstention. Blanchot argued instead that true literary commitment was not to the communist revolution, nor even to France, but to language itself. He opens with an attack on the founding principle of Sartre's argument: "It has been noted with amazement that the question 'What is literature?' has received only meaningless answers. But what is even stranger is that something about the very form of such a question takes away all its seriousness."19 This question cannot help but go awry, because it fails to grasp that literature does not have a stable essence beyond its linguistic construction. Literature is nothing but language, an arrangement of words set down by the writer. Thus, the question of why one writes "is addressed to language, behind the person who is writing and the person who is reading, by language which has become literature."20 Indeed, the writer is necessarily committed to language more than to politics simply by virtue of being a writer as opposed a politician, whether he admits it or not.

This difference was the crux of Blanchot's sabotage of Sartre and of Paulhan. Both Sartre and Paulhan retained an investment in literature's ability to deliver messages, political in the case of the former and aesthetic in case of the latter, that depended on the referential power of language. For Blanchot, however, the committed writer must commit to literature rather than the world. He must commit to words rather than the things that words represent. This is nothing less than the writer's abandonment of representation's claim to be able truly to conjure things before the reader. The kind of literature preferred by Sartre and Paulhan

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20 Ibid., 301.
demands that words reflect things perfectly, that they own them, that they be the exact mirror of reality. Blanchot, however, argued that genuinely literary writing is the embrace of the gap between written words and the things that words summon. In this gap lies the very possibility for literature and poetry; without it, all imagination would be exhausted. To be a writer is to be committed to this gap, to be consumed and inspired by it, to be gripped by the infinite possibility that it promises.

Blanchot's intervention in the debate over the postwar purge occurred when he drew an analogy between the infinite possibility of literature and the infinite possibility of revolution. "Revolutionary action," he wrote, "explodes with the same force and the same facility as the writer who has only to set down a few words side by side in order to change the world." Language contains the only real possibility for change since it has the power to imagine things differently than they are. The writer's imagination flourishes in the separation of words from the things that words represent. To write is to act as the vector by which the new might enter the world. Writing, then, is fundamentally revolutionary not by virtue of the politics it does or does not advocate, but by virtue of the degree to which it commits itself to the potential for change inherent in language itself. Revolution has the same imaginative, creative force as literature. For Blanchot, "revolutionary action is in every respect analogous to action as embodied in literature," because both share "the passage from nothing to everything." Literature can bring the new into the world only because it dares to imagine the world other than as it is.

Blanchot's version of the French Revolution culminated in Terror, in which individuals give up their private existence in order to be borne over into utopian publicity. Personal identity dissolves into an immediate community in which terror has killed the individuality that separates people from each other. Continuing his analogy between writing and revolution,

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21 Ibid., 319.
22 Ibid.

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Blanchot argues that language possesses the same destructive force as terror and the same impetus as terror:

Revolutionary action . . . has the same demand for purity, and the certainty that everything it does has absolute value, that it is not just any action performed to bring about some desirable and respectable goal, but that it is itself the ultimate goal, the Last Act. This last act is freedom, and the only choice left is between freedom and nothing.

This is why, at that point, the only tolerable slogan is Freedom or Death. Thus the Reign of Terror comes into being.\textsuperscript{23}

Blanchot describes a literary terror that arrives like a messianic wind blowing through language, sweeping away the accumulated detritus that masks the things of the world. This was an implicit critique of the similar messianic wind augured by the CNE, which swept writers into exile and banned their works in order to form its utopia. Blanchot appropriated the demand for purity and the spirit of terror from the CNE, but he did so in order to reconstitute literature as an inherently revolutionary entity, prior to the writer’s political commitments.

At this point, however, Blanchot went beyond analogy: in the same way that terror forces the people to submit to a law that carries the implication, even the necessity, of death in order that they might experience life in its plenitude, writing nurtures this death in order to give birth to a renewed relationship among things in and through language. Blanchot makes the point through an example: "For me to be able to say, 'This woman,' I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being."\textsuperscript{24} Of course, Blanchot quickly admits that the woman does not really die, but insofar as the relations among people are conducted through language, insofar as people communicate with each other, the possibility of a linguistic death that might alter these relations remains.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 322.
Blanchot goes out of his way to specify "this woman" as opposed to the universal category Woman. In order for this specific woman to be communicable, her flesh-and-blood reality must be, as Blanchot puts it, "annihilated." That is, for the locution "this woman" to be intelligible to anyone not in the woman's immediate presence, one must accept the violent detachment of the woman's body from the words "this woman." This is an important idea in the history of French thought, but the figure of the death of the body employed here also makes it an important moment in the history of the writers' war.

Again, there was an implicit critique of the CNE and the purge in Blanchot's emphasis on the body that recalls the example of Robert Brasillach. "This woman" did not refer to a real woman alive in France in 1947. It was, rather, a reference to Sartre's feminized image of Brasillach as an intellectual collaborator. In the same way that the death visited through language upon "this woman" acts on her flesh-and-blood reality, Brasillach's trial and execution was not least a punitive action upon a reprobate body. By Sartre's logic, which was the logic of the public shaving, it was Brasillach's body that was brought within the law, and it was the law that possessed his body's death by deciding when, how, and why he would die. Blanchot's critique is that "this woman" refers precisely to the impossibility of executing her. When one says "this woman" one causes the death of the woman's flesh and blood, but one has nothing; one relinquishes possession of the woman's death. "This woman" is given, but Blanchot adds the important caveat that she is given "deprived of being." Her death belongs neither to her nor to the speaker; it is cast, rather, into the oblivion of language, where the writer merely functions as its vessel. Blanchot makes the point explicitly when he says,

It is accurate to say that when I speak, death speaks in me. My speech is a warning that at this very moment death is loose in the world, that it has suddenly appeared between me, as I speak, and the being I address: it is there between us as the distance that separates us, but
Language is neutral, and the death that it brings dissolves rather than enables possession. The writer is no more able to wield the violence of words than things are able to defend themselves. Execution and terror differ at precisely this point: in Blanchot's rendition, the people submit to terror because it emanates directly from them, while execution is the law's assertion of dominion over its subjects. The latter is the very opposite of revolution since there is no change and no possibility, only the reiteration of sovereignty.

Just as he argued against a law that retains the power of execution, Blanchot also argued that the death contained in language is the foundation of communication and, by extension, of community. In Blanchot's revolution there is a kind of literary or linguistic terror, in which things are killed through language and subsequently reborn into a renewed existence in language, although never possessed by language. The author has the power to "create a world without slaves, a world in which the slaves become the masters and formulate a new law." This is a real revolutionary power of change, as opposed to a law that only seeks to possess its delinquents. In arguing that real revolutionary terror exists in language and not in the law, Blanchot wrested the power of execution away from law, figuratively disarming the law of the purge's righteous violence and rearticulating the power of revolutionary change as literary or linguistic violence.

In Writing Degree Zero Barthes paid homage to Blanchot's analogy between writing and the Reign of Terror. Already in 1953, however, Barthes transmuted Blanchot's idea into the death of the author by analyzing revolutionary writers who were victims of the Terror. Faced with their own deaths, writers produced a new kind of "revolutionary writing [that] was the one

\[\text{25 Ibid. Emphasis added.}\]
\[\text{26 Ibid., 315.}\]
and only grand gesture commensurate with the daily presence of the guillotine.  

Terror culminated in this new literature that consistently and grandiloquently spoke the death of the author. Like Blanchot, Barthes concluded that language has the power to reorganize communities, not through bringing death into the world but by virtue of the author's own death. "Revolutionary writing," Barthes suggests, "was so to speak the entelechy of the revolutionary legend: it struck fear into men's hearts and imposed upon them a citizen's sacrament of Bloodshed."  

Jumping ahead fifteen years in the history of this idea, one sees the recurrence of language as a neutral space and of the right to death in Barthes' "Death of the Author" of 1968. But in Barthes' figuration there are two important differences. The first is that now death affects only the author. As with Blanchot's death in language, Barthes' death of the author operates on the author's body but only from the perspective of the reader. At the beginning of his essay Barthes writes,

> Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. ... As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.  

The emphasis on the identity of the body strikingly echoes Blanchot's earlier formulation, but it is also noticeably different. Here it is the reader who imposes the death of the author by approaching the text without recourse to the author as an explanation, allowing the reader to interpret what the author has written free from speculation about how the author's personal psychology or biography influenced the text's meaning. Communication occurs when the reader is free to receive words

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28 Ibid.  
29 Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 142.
without the constraint of the author's posthumous control, as though their creator were trying to possess them long after they were written.

This is where the second important difference from Blanchot occurs. In specifying the death of the author, Barthes raises the register of language's power for change. Where Blanchot isolates a law that possesses the death of its subjects through execution and sabotages it by displacing its sovereignty into language, Barthes substitutes an author who would possess his creations long after he has created them. Consequently, Barthes' death of the author does not challenge the particular sovereign law so much as it challenges the law of sovereignty generally by refusing to allow it even to exist. Barthes writes that

literature (it would be better from now on to say writing), by refusing to assign a "secret," an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law.\(^{30}\)

Barthes' comments about the death of the author are insistently anarchic in the sense that they spring from and argue for a resistance to the assertion of authority. The death of the author as master signifier – as the secret key to every text – is resistance to those who would turn reading into divination and the author into the god of literature. Barthes returns to Blanchot's revolutionary vision for literature with the phrase "the world as text" which corresponds exactly to Blanchot's notion of communication between individuals. Here, however, words have less power than the authority that binds them, and the refusal of author-as-god brings the new relationship between people that was Blanchot's utopian hope. In this way Barthes transferred the theory of the death of the author into a wider questioning of the law than Blanchot envisioned in his critiques of the CNE and the purge. Barthes extended his critique to encompass the principle of sovereignty itself, which no longer operated solely through the

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 147.
law in postwar French society, but rather through the subtler and deeper ideology of authority.

The movement of violence from the execution of Brasillach through Blanchot's "Literature and the Right to Death" and finally coming to rest in Barthes' "The Death of the Author" indicates that the theory of the death of the author was more than just literary iconoclasm. Contemporary French literary theory was born in violence, and Blanchot engaged theory as a revolutionary act. Moreover, it retained its political import beyond the immediate context of the Liberation, as Barthes refigured literary criticism as a violently apostate practice. To study these intellectuals and their theories is a lesson in the subtle convergence of scholarly and political agendas. Never ones to engage in shrill polemics, Blanchot and Barthes disproved the old aphorism "the pen is mightier than the sword" by making the pen itself into a sword. Postwar literary theory constituted an extended sabotage of the writers' war.