

Julia Fiedorczuk

“Death as Death”: Laura Riding and the Limits of Poetry

Beyond this *Atè*, one can only spend a brief period of time.

Jacques Lacan

In a famous passage of the seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis Jacques Lacan proposes a reading of *Antigone* in which Sophocles' heroine becomes the embodiment of pure drive. In Lacan's view, Antigone, taking full responsibility for her desire, manages to move beyond fantasy, beyond repetition automatism or what Sophocles repeatedly denotes as *atè*, fate. As a result of her uncompromising stance, Antigone finds herself in a space between life and death, or rather, between two deaths – the symbolic death (Creon's verdict) and the real death (the heroine's suicide). In that impossible space Antigone encounters what for Lacan counts as the ultimate reality, or the “what is”:

Antigone invokes no other right than that one, a right that emerges in the language of the ineffaceable character of what is – ineffaceable, that is, from the moment when the emergent signifier freezes it like a fixed object in spite of the flood of possible transformations. What is, is, and it is to this, to this surface, that the unshakeable, unyielding position of Antigone is fixed. (*The Ethics* 279)

She thus becomes an ethical figure *par excellence* in that she confronts the truth of her subjectivity, that which *is*, which is “ineffaceable” beyond symbolic representations. In other words, she is brought face to face with what Lacan earlier in the same seminar calls the Thing. It is from that impossible place, “the kingdom of the dead” that Antigone can approach life, “from the place of that limit where her life is already lost, where she is already on the other side” (*The Ethics* 280). In Lacan's view, it is precisely her position between two deaths, at the limit of *atè*, that endows Antigone with “the glow of beauty” (281) the audience of Sophocles' tragedy finds so arresting. I claim that such a confrontation with the emptiness of the drive, followed by a resubjectivization, is what lies at the heart of some of the greatest avant-garde projects of the first half of the twentieth century. The present article examines the work of Laura Riding in the context of Lacanian theory of the subject in order to demonstrate the rhetorical complexity of her poetry and

to point to a paradigmatic character of some of the problems involved in her writings, such as her preoccupation with death, her awareness of the limitations of language and her search for redemption through art.

Laura Riding's early writings, both poetical and essayistic, reveal the author's conviction that poetry is a very special form of expression, a form of truth of such a general and all-encompassing character that it exceeds science and philosophy as truth-searching discourses. For instance, in the preface to her *Collected Poems* (published in 1938) she wrote:

Knowledge implies specialized fields of exploration and discovery; it would be inexact to call poetry a kind of knowledge. It is even inexact to call it a kind of truth, since in truth there are no kinds. Truth is the result when reality as a whole is uncovered by those faculties which apprehend in terms of entirety, rather than in terms merely of parts. (*The Poems of Laura Riding* 406)

A little further she concludes: "A poem is an uncovering of truth of so fundamental and general a kind that no other name besides poetry is adequate except truth" (407). Though her stance is radical, the general claim that poetry is a privileged form of discourse is rather frequently encountered in the writings of modernist poets -- one might, for instance, mention Pound and Yeats in this context. This unique status of poetry is expressed by Riding in almost religious terms, as when she suggests that "existence in poetry becomes more real than existence in time" (406). The theological or moral rhetoric of her meta-poetical writings reflects the author's belief in a redemptive power of poetry, in its potential to make one "exist well" (413).

The idea of redemption, regardless of whether one understands it in religious or in existential terms, implies the perception of reality as somehow "fallen." In fact, both modernist art and psychoanalysis (which in fact constitutes part of modernism) offer various reinterpretations of the Judeo-Christian myth of the Fall. The most essential elements of that myth are the following: the withdrawal of God from the human universe (there is no "big Other"), loss of referentiality in language after God decided to "confuse the language of the whole world" and scatter people "over the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11:9), and the substitution of knowledge (the knowledge of sexuality and death) for being. In the psychoanalytical view, human subjectivity is founded on this fundamental loss of being (what Dominic LaCapra labels as "structural trauma"¹): there is no subject prior to the loss, the loss, or absence of being constitutes the ultimate truth of the subject -- the truth encountered so fearlessly by radiant Antigone. The place of being is taken up by the letter, and, in Lacan's formulation, "the letter kills" (*Écrits* 150), in that it de-

¹ See, for instance, LaCapra's *History and Memory after Auschwitz* and "Trauma, Absence, Loss."

prives the subject of its substance. As Lacan further explains, “...the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing, and this death results in the endless perpetuation of the subject’s desire” (101). The loss of being administered by the letter is compensated by the pleasures of symbolic repetition appreciated by Sigmund Freud in his famous account of the *fort-da* game played by his grandson. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud described the game – which consisted in throwing various small objects out of reach with the exclamation *fort!* and then reclaiming them with a joyful *da!* – as the child’s “great cultural achievement – the instinctual renunciation... which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting” (600). In Freud’s interpretation, the child compensated himself for the loss of his mother by staging her disappearance and return. Freud thus demonstrated that language, the symbolic order, begins with the negation (or the suppression) of loss, and that it usurps the place of that which has been lost. At the same time, however, this symbolic structure protects the subject against melancholia, making life possible. This line of reasoning is taken up by Julia Kristeva in *Black Sun*. She discusses the mechanism of a symbolic defense against melancholia using Freud’s concept of mourning:

[T]he possibility of concatenating signifiers... appears to depend upon going through mourning for an archaic and indispensable object.... Mourning for the Thing – such a possibility comes out of transposing, beyond loss and on an imaginary or symbolic level, the imprints of an interchange with the other articulated according to a certain order. (40)

Mourning is structurally built into language. Language, or “the possibility of concatenating signifiers,” requires that one stops inhabiting the space of one’s imminent death. Thus, though it is in fact language that infects human subject with mortality, it also alienates us, not only from our own being, but also from our death, offering a little symbolic pleasure in exchange.

Is “mourning for the Thing” the only form of redemption available to human beings? Is clinging to the little *jouissance* left one after the castrating encounter with language the only sort of life available to human subjects? I believe that Laura Riding’s poetry repeatedly poses and problematizes these questions attempting to address the issue of how to “exist well” in language. Inevitably, there exists a strong tension in Riding’s work between a desire to move beyond symbolic representations (what one could classify as Antigone’s desire) and the urge to keep on writing (what might be described as Kristeva’s therapeutic strategy). “Death as Death” will serve as the first example. This is the opening of the poem:

fiedorczuk@biuroliterackie.pl

To conceive death as death
 Is difficulty come by easily,
 A blankness fallen among
 Images of understanding,
 Death like a quick cold hand
 On the hot slow head of suicide.
 So it is come by easily
 For one instant. Then again furnaces
 Roar in the ears, then again hell revolves,
 And the elastic eye holds paradise
 At visible length from blindness,
 And dazedly the body echoes
 ‘Like this, like this, like nothing else.’ (89)

The poem begins with the representation of death as a crisis of sense, “A blankness fallen among / Images of understanding.” Such a blankness, or nothingness, cannot be conveyed in language. Therefore, “death as death,” death as such, is immediately replaced by its symbolic representations: hell with its roaring furnaces, or paradise. Death is “*like this*,” which means, primarily, that it is *not exactly* “this,” it is not identical with its representation. In the next part of the poem Riding further elaborates this problem:

Like nothing – a similarity
 Without resemblance. The prophetic eye,
 Closing upon difficulty,
 Opens upon comparison,
 Halving the actuality
 As a gift too plain, for which
 Gratitude has no language,
 Foresight no vision. (89)

The actuality of death is “a gift too plain.” There is no language in which one could express “gratitude” for the gift of death. As a result, “the prophetic eye,” that is to say, the eye oriented towards this inevitable human future, has no choice but to open “upon comparison,” to go on speaking. In order for speech, the space of comparison, to be opened up, something else must be closed off. The difficulty of death, of the Thing, is that it is, by definition, excluded from representation – that is the very condition of the existence of language. Language is thus a mixed blessing: it calls the subject into being

while depriving it of the substance of enjoyment; it protects one against the fundamental meaninglessness of existence but at the same time it stakes out the scope of one’s life.

I claim that Laura Riding’s poetic project consisted in taking poetry to its logical limit, to the place beyond meaning, where it would be forced to confront its own limitations as a linguistic practice. The encounter with that limit eventually led to Riding’s renunciation of this form of language-use.² Riding discussed the problem of poetry’s relation to what in Lacanian terms would be called the symbolic order or the big Other in an early book of criticism titled *Anarchism is not Enough*. In her view, poetry was the only discourse which could transcend the sphere of what she referred to as “Myth.” “Myth” was defined by Riding as a “permanent altar to ephemerality,” that is, a kind of fictitious structure put up in order to produce a sense of coherence and meaningfulness in life (*Anarchism* 9). The purpose of the altar, or “scaffolding” as she also called it, was simply to make life bearable. It did not matter, Riding claimed, that people eventually discovered the imaginary nature of the protective scaffolding, the fact that it is self-sustaining and in no way justified. As long as one went on pretending that “what is ephemeral is permanent,” life went on. Myth prevented people from getting to know the truth about themselves and simultaneously it organized their existence: “It is the repository for whatever one does without knowing why; it makes itself the why” (10). But poetry, Riding went on to explain, was “in opposition to the truth of the Myth”:

It is all the truth it knows, that is, it knows nothing. It is the art of not living. It has no system, harmony, form, public significance or sense of duty.... Whatever language it uses it makes up as it goes and immediately forgets.... In the art of not living one is not ephemerally permanent but permanently ephemeral. (11)

One can perceive two logical moves in the quoted passage. Firstly, poetry is supposed to be that which demystifies, that which destroys the illusion of sense and destabilizes the false order. But secondly, it offers its own truth – one that is in opposition to the truth of the “Myth” – the truth of being “permanently ephemeral.”

The same twofold logic of liberatory destruction followed by construction is to be found in the works of other modernist writers. Terry Eagleton, while excoriating post-

² Laura Riding eventually stopped writing poetry. After her *Collected Poems* appeared in 1938, she published virtually no more poetry till the end of her life in 1991. She made several statements in print as to the reasons behind her decision to discontinue the writing of poems, each time explaining that poetry failed to fulfill what it promised: while creating in one the expectation of truth, it gave one only a semblance of truth. In fact, Riding’s prolonged silence after the publication of her most substantial poetic achievement ought to be seen as an integral part of her project. Moreover, Riding’s refusal to speak should be interpreted in the larger context of modernist poetry’s preoccupation with silence and negativity.

modernism in the essay “Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism,” notes that modernism, though it contributed to a crisis of “traditional ideology of representation,” never abandoned the search for truth (395). It was born in the world “posterior to... metaphysical humanism” which it continued to deconstruct (395). But it was “a deviation still enthralled to a norm, parasitic on what it [set] out to deconstruct” (395). Thus, while radically anarchic with regards to the old order of reality, modernist art sought to install a new kind of order, to discover new meanings, perhaps truer, more ultimate than the former ones.

But in fact, the new truth turns out to be of the same order as the old one: one symbolic construction is replaced with another one, repetition is not arrested. The limit of *atè* can be reached only momentarily, and from that place of emptiness the subject must begin anew the process of constructing meanings, the poem must resume its task of weaving the symbolic reality, just like a dream weaves its fabric around the inaccessible center famously described by Sigmund Freud as its navel. Poetry thus becomes a repeated attempt at confrontation with the truth followed by a relapsing into the vaguely pleasurable repetitiveness of the symbolic order.

One finds this pulsating rhythm in Riding’s poem “Originally.” The first stanza reads:

Originally being meant
 In us no sense of us.
 No guiding sense meant
 Minds ruled by hearts,
 Those brash foreminds
 Minds questioning and answered:
 ‘This way, death following.’ (97)

Because of the omission of punctuation, the initial lines read almost as a random collection of elements that can be concatenated in many different ways. The elements are these: origin, being, meaning, “ourselves,” sense. Originally, one might say, there is no clear connection between these elements, the links between them have to be established in the act of interpretation. As we read on, things become clearer, and it is possible to paraphrase the stanza as follows: originally, whenever that was, being did not in any way entail self-awareness, there was no “guiding sense,” and, as a result, “minds” were ruled by “hearts” (in this conflict of “mind” and “heart,” the poet definitely supports the latter). The “brash foreminds” are guilty of disturbing the original harmony by questioning. This desire to know is lethal, because the answer that the questioning mind receives involves death: the knowledge available to the subject is primarily the knowledge of the

subject's own mortality. Thus, the movement of this stanza is from the original innocence and lack of self-awareness towards sense. This shift involves the Fall, which brings about the inauguration of mortality.

The second stanza of the poem confirms this reading:

Hearts faded, minds knew,
Death led from chaos
Into sense of us,
And no remembrance,
Save death behind. (97)

Once more, what is emphasized in this fragment is the deadly aspect of "sense," or knowledge. This crucial paradox is elaborated in the final lines of the poem:

If now seems little known
Of joys of origin,
It is **that** there were none. (97; my emphasis)

From the position of the human subject, the post-lapsarian (castrated) existence in language is all. There were no "joys of origin" because there were no subjects who could enjoy the original undivided being – subjectivity begins at the very moment of Fall. The poem thus confirms the psychoanalytical insight that the mythical oceanic fullness of being has always already been lost. The syntax of these three lines is complicated by the word "that" which seems to act as a substitute for the conjunction "because" which would be more natural in this context. This substitution introduces another layer of meaning. We know little about the vanished Paradise, because this Paradise never existed in the first place. On the other hand, however, what we do know about the "joys of origin" is precisely the fact that "there were none." Paradoxically, this knowledge, though "little" and negative, is our legacy of the mythical time before the Fall, and it is poetry's mission to preserve and articulate this knowledge, in a gesture evocative of Antigone's great complaint, the speech she delivers when she "crosses the entrance to the zone between life and death" (Lacan, *The Ethics* 280).

But Antigone dies, and poetry continues, remaining on the side of life, of repetition automatism. In "Yes and No" ridiculous rhymes underscore the structural emptiness of language. The poet compares the human being to "an animal unzoological" and asks:

Not visible not invisible,
Removed by dayless night,

fiedoreczuk@biuroliterackie.pl

Did it ever fly its ground
Out of fancy into light,
Into space to replace
Its unwritable decease? (30)

Once again, the “unwritability” of death is emphasized in the stanza. Flying into light, or space, is how death is often imagined, but these visions have as little to do with actual decease as “images of understanding” from “Death as Death.”

How does a poem such as “Yes or No” relate to Laura Riding’s notion of poetry as truth? One ought to remember that Riding never understood truth as a specific idea that could be recounted in an expository way (in the case of poetry, she warns the readers against the “heresy of paraphrase” or what she calls the “frequent vulgarism” of the question: “What is the poem *about?*”). If truth were reducible to data there would be no need to write poetry in the first place. Truth cannot be told, it can be experienced (albeit only through language). It signifies a mode of being and Riding does not hesitate to designate this mode of being as poetic. People who go to poetry for the right reasons – Riding was convinced that there are right and wrong reasons for turning to poetry – whether as writers or as readers, become “equal companions in poetry,” that is, in the experience of “truth” (*The Poems of Laura Riding* 411). Poetry is, therefore, a quest for self-understanding. Ultimately, the self-understanding that can only be gained through the experience of poetry should lead to the transformation of one’s being, or what in the language of psychoanalysis would be referred to as a reconfiguration of subjectivity, a reorganization of the structural elements of one’s subjectivity around the foundational void. The logic of this reconfiguration is in keeping with Saint Paul’s doctrine of “becoming what one has always been” adopted by Heidegger in elaborating his concept of “alreadiness.”³ In Lacan’s terms, one must confront the imaginary/symbolic character of one’s subjectivity and “traverse” it, to reach the place where one is already dead.

Was that confrontation too much for Laura Riding or was it not enough? Did she hope for a more positive kind of redemption, one that would avoid the negativity of the Thing AND the repeatability of the symbolic order? Whatever the answer to these questions is, it is impossible to overlook that an important aspect of her work is a pervasive sense of failure. To refer to Kristeva’s theory outlined above, Riding’s poetry could be read as performing a work of mourning for its own constitutive and unrealizable aspiration. Understood in this way, as a kind of rhetorical device, mourning becomes a trope comparable to that of parabasis, which, according to Walter Benjamin, leads to the “ironiza-

³ See Zimmerman, *Eclipse of the Self*.

tion of form” (de Man 183). Discussing Benjamin’s understanding of parabasis in “The Concept of Irony,” de Man emphasizes its negative, destructive power but at the same time notes that this destructive force is only a stage in a dialectics: “At the moment when all seems lost, when the work is totally undone, it gets recuperated” (183). Such a rhetorical recuperation, a “negative redemption,” is to be found at the heart of the modernist aesthetic as such.

The failure of poetry is expressed in a number of poems by Laura Riding but “Nearly” is perhaps the most outspoken example:

Nearly expressed obscurity
That never was yet but always
Was to be next and next when
The lapse of to-morrow into yesterday
Should be repaired at least till now,
At least till now, till yesterday –
Nearly recaptured chaos
That truth, as for a second time,
Has not yet fallen or risen to –
What news? And which?
You that never were yet
Or I that never am until? (115)

“Never yet but always / was to be” – the speaker seems to be complaining about a promise that was not fulfilled, perhaps the words’ promise of reference. “The lapse of to-morrow into yesterday,” the passage of time, “should be repaired” but is not. The syntax of the poem makes it difficult to reconstruct the logical links between the elements. For instance, what is it that “truth... Has not yet fallen or risen to”? Is it chaos? How are we to understand “that” which precedes the word “truth”? Is it a determining pronoun, or a conjunction (in which case “That truth... Has not yet fallen or risen to” would be a subordinate clause linked with the rhetorical question “What news?”). This complicated syntax reflects the main idea of the poem – its meaning is only approximate, the indeterminacies point to the fact that one can only “nearly” say what one means.

As a result, poetry can be true only in the act of negating its own *raison d’être*. It is a paradoxical and tantalizing space described by Jerzy Jarniewicz in his article on Michael Longley as “that particular marriage of mourning and naming” (154). Notwithstanding the poets repeatedly formulated intentions, Laura Riding’s best poems know not only their own failure but also the pleasure of non-fulfillment. The piece of the telling title “Celebration of failure” sums up most of the above reflections with elegant economy:

And haughty judgement,
That frowned upon a faultless plan,
Now smiles upon this crippled execution,
And my dashed beauty praises me. (132)

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