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Dante and the Sense of Transgression: "The Trespass of the Sign."

William Franke

Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. xv + 200 pp. \$110.00 (hardback), \$32.95 (paperback).

No text can do more than lead the mind to still itself in its source. The mind—the flux of thought, name, form, desire—arises with and constitutes the sense of a finite "I," of an autonomous subject or individuality. If the mind turns its attention to itself in true self-inquiry, asking itself who it is that thinks, who is seeking understanding, it will become absorbed in its own sense of "I." Pursuing that absorption it will plunge into absolute stillness and silence, pure awareness or being, the source or ground whence all thought, form, experience, and identity arises. This is to know oneself as infinite love, to know that nothing exists except that ultimate reality, which is the being, the substance, of all things, and is not other than one's Self. It is the revelation of what has been called the infinite depth of the "I": that if I were not, nothing could be. But there is nothing personal or individual about that true "I" or Self, Christ's "I" (except as the source and fruition of all personality, all individuality): it has no center, it is all things and nothing. The finite ego or individual "I" is revealed to have no existence at all, to be an illusory mirage that dissolves the minute it is sought. It is simply the flux of thought itself that veiled the understanding it sought.

The intuition of this truth haunts the finite self, the thinking mind. Hence the fragility of the ego, which takes every measure to reinforce itself, identifying itself with body, name, memory, with ideas and beliefs and convictions and desires, and with collective reinforcements of identity: nation, religion, creed, career, family, institutions. It constantly seeks to define itself, in order to give itself a sense of reality or permanence. Hence also the obsession of the thinking mind with the pursuit of Truth, that bedrock of reality, certainty, understanding, infinity, and peace or fulfillment that it senses always immanent, yet always transcendent, always just beyond itself, somehow inescapably both present and absent. So it conceives, and then theorizes, God, or Truth, or the One, or the No self, or the Beyond, or the Outside, or the Other, concepts that arise with the illusion of the finite self, and subside with it. Those concepts have no reality either, apart from the flux of the thinking mind: they are one with it. The only thing the ego, the thinking mind, cannot do, is to negate or annihilate itself, which is the only thing that could lead to the understanding and Truth it craves. It feels that would be suicide, when it is instead eternal life, the gateway to love and

understanding. To ask the mind, the flux of concepts, to capture Truth is like dressing the thief as a policeman and sending it out to catch the thief; it is like measuring one's shadow with one's foot. What it seeks is by definition always beyond itself, unattainably other. Unless or until the whole game, brought to the point of paroxysm, collapses. That opens a window to truth, to revelation.

All philosophy or theology that takes the finite self as a given, as the unexamined starting point of reflection, is incoherent, because it begins from illusion. That is largely the history of (especially post-medieval) Western thought and religion, the mind circling around a Truth or understanding or Revelation or love that will always remain necessarily Other (as long as the circling continues), and is often then theorized as such. In most recent times, in French theory, that reflection has reached a particularly mannerist form, a paroxysm of self-conscious vain gesturing and invocatory self-contradictory utterance. That can be seen as a good thing: the incoherence of the millennial project unveiled, the imminent collapse of thought, and thus of the illusory thinking pseudo-subject.

William Franke has brought the harvest of French theory (especially Blanchot, with some Bataille, Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and, in an appendix, a good dose of Levinas) to bear upon Dante's *Paradiso*, focusing on the notion of transgression. He ably traces the many senses in which Dante's text, so apparently intent on affirming order, is in fact transgressive, and obsessed with transgression. The very journey of the *Comedy* is the ultimate transgression of all limits and dualities, such as between the human and the divine, undone in a *trasumanar*. In particular he stresses, perhaps beyond the evidence of the text, how the *Paradiso* negates itself as text, undoes itself as any account or affirmation of anything, whether finite or transcendent, how it brings language to a limit at which it and all reference become purely self-referential and then implode. It is precisely at this limit that the Beyond or Other or Outside is disclosed, or rather, that all possible dualities are negated, including that of a limit and a beyond (Barthes's neuter, or Blanchot's *pas au-delà*). In this account, language stands in for thought, for the activity of the finite thinking pseudo-subject; transgression is its frustrated attempt to escape itself.

Franke is wonderfully, persistently clear, as precise as one can be in elucidating French thought. The exercise of reading those texts with and against the *Paradiso* illuminates both, as well as what is at stake for both literature and philosophy or theology. Especially in the treatment of Levinas and the "Other," there is of course the usual conflation of self and Self (what Levinas calls "Other" in fact corresponds to the true Self, which is radically

other than all finite selves, but intuits itself as or through each finite self; the individual self is constituted by—has no existence apart from—its relation to that originary Self). There is also occasionally the suspicion that an adequate understanding of medieval philosophy and theology (such as that Being or God is nothing, but the pure living conscious act through which anything exists) would already capture, in some cases perhaps more precisely, the intuitions that emerge. But that is fine: each age must re-invent its own terminology, as long as the mind continues to circle in vain around itself.

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A Will to Believe: Shakespeare and Religion.

David Kastan

Oxford University Press, 2014. xii + 155 pp. \$40.00 (hardcover).

The title of David Scott Kastan's latest book should be *Shakespeare and Religion: A New Secularizing Approach*. Discussing the controversy surrounding John Shakespeare's "Spiritual Testament," Kastan plays the role of a pyrrhonist: one who is persuaded by the impossibility of judging a question on one side or the other. On the one hand, he acknowledges that, quite unexpectedly, twentieth-century scholarship discovered the document's lost template in the printing presses of the Counter-Reformation. On the other hand, he grants no authority or evidential weight to Joseph Moseley, the master bricklayer who discovered the document in 1757; and he does not address the recently contested phraseology of the Spiritual Testament, an aspect of the case where Dennis Taylor has shown Robert Bearman to have wrongly attacked the document's authenticity. A fussy neutrality can conceal a latent bias: "There is no way to establish if the Spiritual Testament is authentic and, even if we could, there is no way to determine what the document represented for John Shakespeare" (25). Kastan betrays his bias by doubling-down: why raise the question of the document's authenticity if the question lacks consequence? Why suggest that it might possibly refer to "another John Shakespeare, a shoemaker"? (24) I think I understand: the shoemaker line is a joking comment on an absurd or impossible situation. So what if the joke fails to explain the document's Henley Street location? So what if the document is real? It doesn't matter, in any case: "it would still tell us nothing about *William Shakespeare's faith*" (his italics, 26).

I find this mountain of skepticism troubling—all the more so because it conceals a "will to believe" on Kastan's part, or, at least, a will to bend the