

REVIEW OF LITERATURE SUSPENDS DEATH

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Chris Danta, *Literature Suspends Death: Sacrifice and Storytelling in Kierkegaard, Kafka and Blanchot*, Continuum, London and New York, 2011. 167 pp., £55.00 hb., 978 1 44113 972 6.

In *Literature Suspends Death*, Chris Danta takes Genesis 22 as the starting point for an investigation of the role of literary imagination. As is well-known, Genesis 22 tells the story of the patriarch Abraham of whom God demands the sacrifice of his beloved only son. However, before Abraham can carry out this sacrifice, God calls him back. In the end nothing happens, the sacrifice is averted and the son is substituted by a ram. According to Danta, this non-eventuation of the sacrifice shows that 'Genesis 22 crucially concerns the problem of the imaginary.' (23) His aim is to read the Genesis story from a literary-theoretical perspective in order to show how it can 'illuminate the secular situation of the literary writer.' (18) To do this, Danta stages a fruitful confrontation between Søren Kierkegaard as defender of religion and inwardness and Franz Kafka and Maurice Blanchot as defenders of literature. Three important points generated by this confrontation give a good indication of Danta's central argument: the problem of identification; the moment of substitution; and the spectrality of the writer.

The first point concerns the problem of identification. Danta argues that 'Kafka's and Kierkegaard's various retellings of the Genesis story attest to the following paradox: as soon as one tries to re-imagine Abraham for oneself, he ceases to be the real Abraham.' (21) For Danta, these retellings show that one can only identify with Abraham by imagining another Abraham, an Abraham that fails the test of faith. This fictional 'other' Abraham is a figure of doubt and despair. It is here that Danta stages a first confrontation between Kierkegaard and Kafka. Kierkegaard solves the problem of identification by introducing a doubting narrator (the pseudonymous author Johannes *de silentio*) with whom the reader can identify. This narrator turns the biblical Abraham into an incredible figure who only becomes greater because of our failure to identify with him. Kierkegaard's decision to turn Abraham into an incredible figure who escapes the literary

imagination thus proves, for Danta, that he defends religion and inwardness by subordinating literature.

To counter this decision, Danta evokes Kafka. Kafka stages a radical disidentification with the biblical Abraham. For Kafka Abraham is a comic figure. Rather than closing the distance between God and Abraham by faith, Kafka enlarges this distance by withdrawing power from the hero and highlighting his inactivity. So, for example, he presents a mundane Abraham who first has to set his house in order. In Kafka's own words:

I could conceive of another Abraham for myself ... who was prepared to satisfy the demand of the sacrifice immediately, with the promptness of a waiter, but was unable to bring it off because he could not get away, being indispensable ... The house was never ready; for without having his house ready, without having something to fall back on, he could not leave. (Kafka as cited by Danta, 4)

For Danta, this means that Kafka adopts a strategy that is precisely opposed to Kierkegaard's. Kafka casts doubt on the religious experience that is formulated in Genesis 22 and rejects Kierkegaard's interpretation of faith as the willingness to sacrifice the beloved one. In this way he subordinates the biblical Abraham—who stands the test of faith—to literature by impeding the reader's identification with this Abraham.

The second point that arises from Danta's readings concerns the moment of substitution at the end of the Genesis story. When Abraham draws the knife to sacrifice Isaac, he is called back by God who provides a substitute, i.e. a ram. In Danta's view, Kierkegaard does not give a convincing account of this moment of substitution. He argues that Kierkegaard only mentions it to indicate 'that Abraham fails the test if he looks outside of himself.' (105) Danta suggests that Kierkegaard focuses too much on Abraham's secret communion with God and forgets the other characters that play a role in the story (Sarah, Isaac and the ram). In doing so, he misses the importance of the end of the story. For Danta, this means that he fails to acknowledge that 'the suspension of the sacrifice produces a momentary disjunction between Abraham's motives (to fulfill God's initial command and sacrifice Isaac) and God's motives (to call off the sacrifice by calling it a test).' (104) This 'momentary disjunction' shows that the Genesis story 'brings together two apparently contradictory modes of time: on the one hand, the singular, teleological

temporality of a human sacrifice demanded and, on the other hand, the repetitious, deferred temporality of a human sacrifice averted.' (22) Danta argues that Kierkegaard concentrates primarily on the first mode of time, i.e. the time of sacrifice that opens up the secret communion between God and Abraham. This first mode of time transcends the human world and creates a transcendental realm that is outside time.

To counter Kierkegaard's one-sided focus on God's demand for a human sacrifice, Danta evokes Blanchot. Blanchot is more concerned with the second mode of time: the time of substitution. In Blanchot's reading the substitution of the ram for Isaac creates a new, deferred realm of time. Danta describes this realm as a no-man's-land that does not transcend the human world (it therefore differs radically from the secret communion between God and Abraham in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*). Abraham wanders in this no-man's-land, but he no longer has a task, he only has to live with the discovery of the substitutability of his beloved son. According to Danta, Blanchot shows that the suspension of death in the Genesis story opens up a space in which the identity of Isaac becomes 'spectral'. Blanchot describes this spectrality as follows: 'Others saw the son in Isaac, but they didn't know what had happened on the mountain, but he saw the ram in his son, because he had made a ram for himself out of his child.' (Blanchot as cited by Danta, 103) In Danta's view, this moment of substitution not only makes Isaac identity spectral, but also precludes Abraham from 'gaining a sense of identity from his willingness to go through with the sacrifice' (106).

Blanchot's interpretation of Isaac, introduces the third point of the book: the spectrality of the writer. Kierkegaard, Kafka and Blanchot not only share an interest in the Genesis story; they are united by what Danta calls Scheherazade's law. Danta describes this in terms of the title of his book: literature suspends death. In Danta's view, all three writers realize that Scheherazade's law comes at a price. The act of writing can only suspend the writer's normal identity by substituting for it a spectral and imaginary one. Danta suggests, without saying as much, that Kierkegaard's understanding of the spectrality of the writer differs from that of Kafka and Blanchot. Whereas Kierkegaard understands this spectrality in terms of sacrifice, Kafka and Blanchot understand it in terms of substitution. This sheds new light on Danta's remark that Kierkegaard subordinates literature to Abraham, whereas Kafka subordinates Abraham to

literature. Danta suggests that in Kierkegaard's works writing still has a preordained object that gives it meaning. In this way, Kierkegaard ultimately subordinates literature to a meaningful world-view. The space that is opened by the writer is not defined by the repetitious, deferred temporality of literary substitution, but by the teleological temporality of religious sacrifice. For Kierkegaard, the suspension of death is only made possible by the willingness to go through with the sacrifice. In his view, Abraham can only win back Isaac by first losing him.

To counter Kierkegaard's poetics of sacrifice, Danta evokes a poetics of postponement and substitution that he finds in Kafka and Blanchot. For them literature is not subordinated to anything, but becomes its own end. It opens up a repetitious and deferred temporality that is similar to the no-man's-land in which Abraham dwells after the ram's substitution for Isaac. Here the writer is beyond any project, the goal becomes dissociated from the way. Danta points out that this does not separate the writer from others, as in Kierkegaard. On the contrary, the work only gains reality in relation to the reader who reacts to it. For Blanchot, 'the writer is, like Isaac, someone who lacks any intrinsic identity and who must always define himself in relation to the human and nonhuman others around him.' (24)

To conclude, *Literature Suspends Death* shows convincingly that the combined perspective of Kafka and Blanchot offers a valuable alternative for Kierkegaard's focus on Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. However, Danta's rich and promising reading of Kafka and Blanchot only succeeds by first undermining Kierkegaard's interpretation. The generosity that is shown towards Kafka and Blanchot is not extended to Kierkegaard. In this regard, it is striking that Danta has almost nothing to say about Kierkegaard's extensive reflections on his own authorship as a type of indirect communication, which are surely extremely relevant in the light of Danta's problem of literary imagination? A generous inclusion of these reflections would bolster Kierkegaard's perspective and would make Danta's confrontation more balanced, and thus more relevant. Nonetheless, *Literature Suspends Death* is an impressive book that deserves many readers among both specialized scholars and interested enthusiasts.

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