On Monstrous Shoulders: Literature, Fraud, and Faith in Derrida

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In Naas’ Miracle and Machine, the figure of the underworld is present not merely through his brilliant reading of the Don DeLillo novel by that title but also in his analysis of other subterranean figures of Derridean analysis such as khôra, Persephone, and Gradiva. I would like to respond to Naas’ book by bringing into this conversation another literary figure from another underworld, “that filthy image of Fraud,” Geryon, as he appears in Canto 17 of Dante’s Inferno. While Derrida speaks of Chimera, in The animal that therefore I am, as far as I know he never discusses Dante’s Geryon. Nonetheless, I am hoping that bringing this particular beast and Dante’s report of his encounter with it into our conversation may complement Naas’ discussion of these other figures. More importantly, it was Naas’ discussion of the relationship of literature to testimony, and thus to faith, that inspired me to think that Dante’s fraudulent beast might give us some insight into the stakes for Derrida of including the topic of literature in any discussion of religion. Naas himself makes the point that it is “perhaps no coincidence that so many of Derrida’s texts on religion revolve around literature, from ‘Shibboleth’ and other texts on the poetry of Paul Celan to ‘Abraham, the Other’ . . . to The Gift of Death.”

As we know, literature as a theme is never far from Derrida’s view, nor is it far from Naas’ in his treatment of the relation of religion and technology in Derrida. It shadows these two through Naas’ analysis of DeLillo’s Underworld, asking us to consider how DeLillo might serve as a supplement to Derrida’s more explicit thematization of religion in its link to technology. More straightforwardly, Naas treats this topic in his chapter entitled “The Passion of Literature.” Here he introduces Derrida’s essay “Demeure: Fiction and Testimony,”

which is itself a reading of Maurice Blanchot’s “The Instant of My Death.” Appearing in a volume with Blanchot’s narrative, we can understand it as itself a “countersignature” to Blanchot’s story. The concept of the countersignature becomes the focus of Naas’ chapter and in many ways the key to Naas’ book, for it seems to mark both the relation of Naas’ book to Derrida’s “Faith and Knowledge” but also to embody one strategy by which we can affirm the structure of autoimmunity in religion, in politics, and indeed in life. The Blanchot story upon which “Demeure” comments is presented as a report of how its protagonist miraculously escapes a firing squad. Because of what we know about Blanchot from other sources, the story beckons to be read as autobiography, but never offers itself up as such. Derrida’s reading of it is itself a meditation on the way in which fiction haunts every act of testimony. I quote from “Demeure: Fiction and Testimony”: “There is no testimony that does not structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie and perjury—the possibility of literature, of the innocent or perverse literature that innocently plays at perverting all of these distinctions.” The fascinating thing about “The Instant of My Death,” the Blanchot text upon which Derrida is commenting, is that it presents itself as a fiction (not as a testimony), written in the third person, despite the first-person title. Its dissimulation, its “perversity,” if it can be said to have one, is that it may in fact be testimony disguised as a fiction. Derrida reports in the essay that a year before writing it, he received a letter from Blanchot that stated, “July 20. Fifty years ago, I knew the happiness of nearly being shot to death.” Derrida makes the point here that fiction or literature refers not so much to the content of what one says as to a kind of function, a deracinating function. Here indeed is where it shares something in common with technology and with religion, insofar as it appropriates technology to protect itself against deracination. The question then becomes, can literature offer a different relation to its own deracination, one that perhaps affects and inflects the deracinating auto-immune strategies of religion?

“Literature has no essence; it is not, it does not exist, it does not remain at home, abidingly [à demeure] in the identity of a nature.” Its function is to disrupt the faithful relation of discourse between sender and receiver. As Derrida puts it in “Literature in Secret,” “Literature would begin wherever one no

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4) Ibid., 52.
5) Ibid., 28.