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Dante's Interpretive Journey by William Franke; Dante's Political Purgatory by John A. Scott
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Comparative Literature, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Spring, 1998), pp. 178-181
Published by: Duke University Press on behalf of the University of Oregon
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1771255
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DANTE'S INTERPRETIVE JOURNEY. By William Franke. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996. xi, 250 p.

DANTE'S POLITICAL PURGATORY. By John A. Scott. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996. xi, 295 p.

It must be some kind of tribute to the extraordinary range and vitality of contemporary Dante studies in the English-speaking world that two books so utterly dissimilar yet so consistently compelling as these can appear in the space of a single year. Even the names of the series to which their publishers have allotted them—"Religion and Postmodernism" for Franke, "The Middle Ages" for Scott—seem to bespeak a disparity not only of interest and approach but of intended audience: it is hard to imagine that there will be much overlap between the religious postmodernists (or postmodern religionists) who grapple with Franke and the hardened medievalists who engage with Scott. Yet at the center of each author's preoccupations is the work of Dante; and the reader who follows both of these differently but powerfully gifted scholars to the end of their respective textual and critical journeys will be challenged, stimulated and enlightened in ways that—*experto crede*—are scarcely possible to foresee at the outset.

William Franke begins his book with a graceful acknowledgment of the merits and influence of recent North American Dante scholarship, but immediately points out—as very soon proves to be the case—that his own work "brings quite a different agenda and a different sort of sensibility to the study of Dante" (p. ix). Though the depth and richness of his thinking are such that it would be an act of unusual temerity to try to define that agenda and sensibility within the compass of a review, and although Franke himself calls his work "hybrid and eclectic" (p. ix), it seems safe to say that he is anxious, above all, to save Dante from the potentially smothering—or at least distancing— embrace of historians and philologists (whose critical achievement he nonetheless recognizes), by recuperating the *Commedia* for late twentieth-century readers who, rather than being interested in Dante only as professional antiquarians or medieval specialists, encounter him as part of their own moral and intellectual lives, lives inevitably defined by the modern—and postmodern— condition. Accordingly, his vehicle for doing this is not the kind of analysis and interpretation most often undertaken by those who come to Dante with historical, linguistic and/or literary-critical credentials, but a profoundly and self-consciously *philosophical* reading generated primarily by his immersion in (mostly Gadamerian) hermeneutics. It would not, perhaps, be too much to say that Franke deliberately brackets the dominant modes of contemporary North American Dante scholarship in order to read the *Commedia* as though its author were our—and Gadamer's, Heidegger's, Ricoeur's—contemporary.

The result is a demanding but rewarding book, whose every page testifies to the intensity of its author's intellectual engagement with his material and requires, in turn, the closest possible attention from its reader. The work's five substantial chapters take their inspiration from specific passages in the *poema sacro*, but, while reading those passages closely and searchingly, in the best traditions of orthodox Dante scholarship, they also open them up to a sustained philosophical analysis in which the problematic of interpretation is recurrently and revealingly foregrounded.

The first of these, "The Address to the Reader," returns to ground well trodden by an earlier generation of scholarly giants (Gmelin, Auerbach, Spitzer—all amply credited), but also, in its employment of arguments and strategies connected with the hermeneutical tradition and some of its (theological, deconstructionist) offshoots, both looks afresh at the perennially thorny issue of Dante's narrative self-reflexivity and presents an enticing introductory example of Franke's characteristic method. Chapter 2, "Dante's Hermeneutic Rite of Passage: *Inferno* IX," begins with the notorious incident of Virgil's physical, verbal, and intellectual pa-

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ralysis before the gates of the city of Dis, and extends the meaning of this "interpretive impasse" (p. 92) to apply to the whole of Hell. Its argument is complemented by that of chapter 3, "The Temporality of Conversion," a broader theoretical reflection on the issues raised by *Inferno* IX—repetition, temporality, allegory, understanding —in the context of hermeneutic thought.

In chapter 4, "The Making of History," Franke examines the seemingly ubiquitous historicity in Dante's text, beginning with that of *Purgatorio* X, and again dexterously uses hermeneutic categories and arguments to advocate a shift of attention toward the historicity of that text's *reader*, in accord with his belief that "the interpretive dynamics of [Dante's] text can be more sharply focused today than ever before on the basis of what is in some respects a more finely articulated theoretical understanding of the hermeneutic principles of historical interpretation" (p. 170). But, in Franke's view, the question of historical understanding and interpretation cannot fail to raise—as it raised for Dante—the perhaps insoluble but nonetheless inescapable problem of truth. For, while the reader's experience of the poem is necessarily and fundamentally interpretive, being itself a *re*-interpretation of interpretations initially offered by Dante as poet, it is so structured as to call for an integration of both readerly and poetic interpretations that can point toward the utterance and understanding of truth, a truth that is indissolubly linked with transcendence. Franke is under no illusion about the difficulty this approach will have in gaining acceptance in the (post-) modern context, but he pursues it bravely and compellingly into his final chapter, "Resurrected Tradition and Revealed Truth," a reading of the Statius character in *Purgatorio* XXI-XXII that adds poetry to the argumentative nexus of history, interpretation, theology, and truth that underpins his book as a whole.

I have, perhaps perversely, left until last any consideration of the book's introduction, "Truth and Interpretation in the *Divine Comedy*," partly because its sinewy texture and conceptual toughmindedness both make it resistant to paraphrase and impose considerable demands on its reader (who must surely become, many times over, a *re*-reader)—and partly because these may very well be some of the most important pages written on Dante in the last decade, if not the last half century. As Franke undertakes his rigorous theoretical definition and exploration of the terms that will continue to preoccupy him throughout his book, the reader is privileged to follow, from sentence to sentence, the workings of an outstanding philosophical intellect applying itself, at the highest level, to a text that eminently deserves but rarely receives such treatment. The case for Dante's simultaneous historicity and contemporaneity, for what Franke calls "the synergism between interpretation theory and Dante's interpretive practice" (p. 4), is made here with a force and a precision that raise it to the level of genuine eloquence. Even though Franke self-depreciatingly suggests that readers "need not delay proceeding to substantive criticism of the poem" (p. ix), especially in chapters 2 through 5, they will follow his advice at their intellectual peril. The introduction—like the rest of the book—should be read and pondered by anyone who cares about Dante, or poetry, or history, or theology, or interpretation, or truth, or, quite simply (and in the philosophical dialect dear to Franke), our human being-in-the-world.

The world and our various ways of being in it are also, though in a very different sense, the concern of John Scott's distinguished contribution to the tradition of thinking about the *Commedia*, and specifically *Purgatorio*, in the context of politics. Following a trail blazed by such *maestri* of long ago as Francesco Ercole and Alessandro Passerin d'Entrèves, and extended more recently by Joan Ferrante, Scott aims unerringly at the thematic heart of Dante's poem, showing beyond question that the *poema sacro* is also, by design and from beginning to end, a *poema politico*, and that the section of it most deeply and suggestively pervaded by political concerns is *Purgatorio*.

Scott's tight focus on the second *cantica*, which inspires a minutely close reading whose insights and discoveries seldom fail to carry complete conviction, is one

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of the great strengths of his book. But before he embarks on this textual spadework he offers three extremely valuable introductory chapters of political biography that trace the course of Dante's life and his involvement in politics, from the passionate internecine struggles of late Duecento Florence, through the phase of "exile and conversion" that followed (from 1302 to 1305), and finally through the long years leading up to his death in 1321, a period when Dante's self-perceived (and defiantly embraced) status as *exul inmeritus* embittered his experience while inspiring the transmutation of that experience into poetry. Scott is a lucid and immensely knowledgeable guide to this subject—certainly the best currently available in English—and the abundance and interest of the material he provides will make these chapters indispensable not only to students—to whom they can safely and urgently be recommended—but also to any reader of the *Commedia* not hopelessly misled by theoretical sophistry into disdain for the "merely" biographical.

Having laid these foundations in Part One, Scott proceeds, in Part Two, to an extended sequential analysis of *Purgatorio* that consistently highlights the central importance of Dante's political themes and makes an unanswerable case for their abiding relevance to a reading of his poem even in the 1990s, when the bones of contention are forgotten and the antagonists long since dust. Scott's underlying credo is as simple as its consequences are profound: "the political thread is an essential element in the understanding of the overall message that awakened Dante's sense of mission and inspired the writing of the greatest poem of the Christian Middle Ages" (p. xi). In other words, if we are interested in Dante, or his writings, we must be interested in his and their view of politics.

Scott explores the ramifications of this principle in a series of chapters that take as their focal points "Cato: A Pagan Suicide in Purgatory," "Manfred and Bonconte," "The Sordello Episode (*Purgatorio* VI-VIII)," "The Dream and the Entrance to Purgatory (*Purgatorio* IX-X)," "The Poem's Center (*Purgatorio* XII-XVIII)," "The She-Wolf and the Shepherds (*Purgatorio* XIX-XX)," and "The Apocalypse (Purgatorio XXIX-XXXIII)." The only substantial section of the *cantica* not treated in depth is that running from the appearance of Statius in canto XXI to the travelers' entrance into the Earthly Paradise. (While noting [p. 180] the possible political implications of the presence in the poem of the author of the *Thebaid,* Scott appears to see these cantos as dominated by an interest in poets and poetry to the otherwise virtually complete exclusion of political subtext.)

A book so vast in scope, founded on reading so extensive—Scott seems to have missed practically nothing published on his subject, and takes into account all the most recent and controversial work on pertinent aspects of Dante's politics and of *Purgatorio,* such as the revisionist allegorism of Peter Armour—will inevitably include points of detail that not every reader will accept. By the very nature of his essentially historicist argument, Scott is called upon to enter the fray surrounding many of the most vigorously disputed issues in Dante scholarship (the date of *Monarchia* and the identity of the "cinquecento diece e cinque" being only the most obvious examples), and he does so with courtly grace and scholarly gusto, invariably giving others a fair hearing even as he scores points of his own. Moving beyond his general belief in the crucial importance of politics to the *Commedia,* his particular case is that *Purgatorio* "was inspired in large measure by the lesson drawn by the poet from Henry VII's attempts (1310–1313) to restore imperial power and authority in Italy" (p. ix). Readers who give his rich and detailed argument the close attention it deserves will find it increasingly hard to dissent from this view, given the weight of evidence for it that accumulates through Scott's elegantly written pages. *Purgatorio* has long been the part of Dante's poem least well served by English-language scholarship; this admirable book goes far indeed toward remedying that situation.

Dante scholars are all too familiar with the Trecento designation of their cherished author as *theologus-poeta,* and have often fallen into variably fruitful contro-

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versies as to the exact meaning of that hallowed phrase. Readers of Franke may feel inclined to add *philosophicus* to the mix; readers of Scott will certainly want to throw in *politicus*. The more important point is, surely, that Dante's work continues to absorb and transcend all the epithets its readers seek to pin on it (and its author), standing forever just a step beyond what the critical acumen on which we so pride ourselves can ever aspire to reach. The authors of these two books, in their fascinatingly disparate ways, have done more than most to help narrow that endlessly tantalizing distance.

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WRITING IN PARTS: IMITATION AND EXCHANGE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE. By Kevin McLaughlin. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995. 186 p.

MODERNISM AND MASS POLITICS: JOYCE, WOOLF, ELIOT, YEATS. By Michael Tratner. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995. viii, 284 p.

Sent to me as a pair because both works deal with relations between literature and "mass culture" in British and French contexts, Kevin McLaughlin's *Writing in Parts* and Michael Tratner's *Modernism and Mass Politics* are in fact dramatically different books. McLaughlin's study is a flawed gem, elegantly written and carefully structured to accommodate readings of texts by Honoré de Balzac and Charles Dickens within a broader discussion of how mimesis helps us discern the social critique enacted by certain cultural artifacts. *Modernism and Mass Politics*, by contrast, is a fairly clumsy assemblage, a series of strained and often irritatingly unresponsive readings of works by James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, and W. B. Yeats, all squeezed into a framework derived chiefly from a piecemeal reading of the French political theorist Georges Sorel. Tratner's aim is to demonstrate that "many modernist literary forms emerged out of efforts to write in the idiom of the crowd mind" (p. 2). Though neither book succeeds in telling us as much as its author thinks it does about what McLaughlin calls "the distinction we make between literature and mass culture" (p. 139), they fall short for quite different and telling reasons.

McLaughlin is interested in "the relationship of art to the universalization of exchange under capitalism" (p. 2). In particular—and the word "particular" is crucial throughout his discussion—he wants to explore how art, rather than simply resisting this process of universalization, can actually "play a part in defining a force that threatened, and continues to threaten, to subsume it out of existence" (p. 4). McLaughlin suggests that art can participate in this act of definition by assuming what he calls a "mimetic disposition toward the commodity" (p. 19); by appropriating and imitating various aspects of commodity culture, certain works of art can assert the value of the particular by anticipating and enacting its struggle with the generalizing forces of exchange. One might say that, under this scenario, art challenges its enemy by learning its tricks.

To reveal such imitation in action, McLaughlin examines four texts by Balzac (*Illusions perdues*, *Le Chef d'oeuvre inconnu*, *Louis Lambert*, and the 1842 "Avant-Propos" announcing his huge assemblage of novels and tales *La Comedie humaine*) and two texts by Dickens (*Sketches by Boz* and *Pickwick Papers*), finding in each of them moments "where the effort to resist commodification turns into mere mimicry" (p. 42). In the "Avant-Propos," for instance, McLaughlin finds Balzac anticipating the effort that will be made to subject his *Comedie humaine* to a process of exchange by "thematizing the key question of measure, which is, as we have seen, the sine qua non of commodification in Marx and thus central to the approach taken by Horkheimer and Adorno to the 'culture industry'" (p. 34). Similarly,

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