

*Dante's Interpretive Journey.* By William Franke. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. ISBN 0-226-25998-6. Pp. xii + 250. No price available.

The title of this book is fair warning. The words "hermeneutics" or "interpretation" will be appearing, more than once, on just about every page. William Franke is thoroughly persuaded of his hermeneutical position. He has no doubt that, for the author giving form to fictive experience and for the reader responding to it, truth is always engaged. Truth, from the standpoint of this hermeneutics, is not so much an account of the way things are independently of our knowing, but the achievement of someone at a given time recognizing and affirming significance.

Franke's chief authority for hermeneutics is Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger, to be human meant to be "self-interpreting." Franke subscribes to Heidegger's concept of "historizing," an activity concerned not so much with composing the past or even the present but rather the future. "The history we care about," in Heidegger's words, "is the one that will make our future" (qtd. 154). In his chapter "The Temporality of Conversion," Franke describes the Christian experience of history as one of "repetition and ecstatic openness." The New Testament, he says in explanation, issues us "an imperative to live according to a salvation event that is both already and not yet" (130).

Franke also accepts Heidegger's *Dasein*, a conception of metaphysical import that keeps slipping away from this reviewer. (Take, for example, this sentence: "Dasein's mode of being is to gather itself out of the possibilities that it projects" [115].) Heidegger's Being, conscious and substantive but seemingly impersonal, his way of indicating transcendence, only muddies the waters when it comes to Dante's theology.

Franke draws usefully from the philosophers Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, but his hermeneutics owes just as much to biblical studies. Hermeneutics originated as an approach to Scripture that allowed and factored in the changes of self-understanding among readers of a later age. Franke also dwells upon Rudolph Bultmann and makes this Bultmannian comment: "The historicity of faith belongs in the first instance to the interpretive acts that constitute the historic being of one who believes" (163).

The literary currents of today run to suspicion and systematic doubt as normative in reading, but hermeneutics accepts "the element of faith—of choosing to believe, for motives that may or may not be rational (and are not all reasons and motives compounded of both?)—that underlies all our 'knowledge'" (19). Franke brings this approach of empathy rather than of wariness to the reading of Dante. He takes a stand counter to "the silent consensus and implicit norm in Dante studies" these days (183), which is that one should concentrate on how the *Divine Comedy* works rather than on what it says. Teodolinda Barolini, when she speaks of detheologizing Dante in *The Undivine Comedy* (1993), gives formulation to this secular tendency.

Franke for his part, underplaying aesthetics, pursues "a criticism that situates itself within a horizon of the question of truth posed by the poem." We should be "making ourselves susceptible to it as truth" (183). He quotes Heidegger to this effect: "Art is the setting-into-work of truth" (8). Even while admitting the degree to which Dante is "permeated by prejudice and partiality" (45), Franke tells us not to be put off the scent. Whether or not Dante derived his *Divine Comedy* from some vision or mystical experience, his imagination certainly guided itself by "transcendent revelation" (18)—that is, by "the word of God, . . . to which human text

and tradition are but instrumental" (20). The *Divine Comedy* was not an end in itself but "a means of facilitating a more direct encounter with the divine Word" (21). Dante's account of the descent to Hell, the hard purgatorial climb, and the soaring ascent through Paradise "is a truth that makes a claim, demanding conversion" (200).

Do we see Dante, in his text, moving us to this response? Decidedly. The strongest evidence, for Franke, lies in the poet's many addresses to the reader, a novel tactic among classic authors. They spur the reader to engagement in the narrative, to making the story one's own. At the entrance to the inner part of Hell, the City of Dis, for example, Dante and his guide Virgil find the gates barred and their way blocked by the three Furies, and they risk being turned to stone by the Medusa with the Gorgon's head. The poet interrupts the narrative to exclaim: "Think, reader, whether I was not dismayed" (8.94). He wants the reader to attend not so much to the letter of what is happening as to the allegory: "O you who have sound intellects, / look at the doctrine which hides itself / beneath the veil of the strange verses" (9.61-63). Rhetorical moves such as these are a "summons to hermeneutis" (84). At the above impasse, or blockage, the reader, as much as the protagonist Dante, is in spiritual danger and needs the heaven-sent messenger, a Hermes figure, who will dash open the gates of understanding.

The urging to look into ourselves and interpret rightly is sounded throughout the *Inferno*. The reader, as much as the wavering pilgrim, needs it as an antidote to fear, sympathy, or mistaken admiration. One needs it upon encountering, for example, Francesca, "dissembling her sin with lovely language" (166); or Brunetto Latini, still preoccupied with fame; or the fraudulent monster Geryon, turning opposite to the normal direction of the travelers (this allegory "has the face of a lie" but covers truth); or Ulysses, bullheaded in his ill-advised adventure; or the treacherous Count Ugolino, consumed by revenge.

Throughout his second chapter Franke develops with much insight the "increasingly gross, corporeal, and by the end, literally frozen physical fact" of Hell (92). He points out, along the way, Dante's "shifting images of the insufficiency and instability of all human judgments" (100). "The denizens of Hell are shown as sinning fundamentally by obstinate, irreversible misunderstandings of themselves . . . . The judgments manifest in them show how God sees them" (167). Franke points out the many hermeneutic signals by which the poet guides us, according to that divine viewpoint, along the perilous journey, a journey that from line 1 he designates not as "my life" but *nostra vita*—"our life."

In discussing the *Purgatorio*, Franke dwells on two episodes. The first is the series of *exempla* of humility in Canto 10 involving the cornice of the proud. The pictorial examples are cut as intaglios into the rock with such realistic artistry that they seem almost alive. They are not, however, meant as a *trompe l'oeil*, the divine art trying to impress us. Rather, the verisimilitude of this image, when the poet exposes it as a mere appearance, works "to solicit interpretation" (172). The other episode Franke lingers upon is the release of Statius, the late Roman poet, from Mount Purgatory. He comes up from behind to join Dante and Virgil, just as Jesus had joined the disciples on the way to Emmaus, revealing himself only in "the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35). St. Luke's eucharistic experience in the early Christian community, where Christ was recognized in faith by the "burning heart" of the communicant, enabled him to interpret Christ's presence to his earliest disciples. This interpretive action of the evangelist spurs Dante to exercise his own free hand. Just as Statius and the medieval world could find passages in Virgil consonant with their faith, beyond what the author could have perceived, so

Dante can invent (or find, in the hermeneutic sense) the pagan poet Statius undergoing conversion and achieving salvation.

Franke reads the later cantos of the *Purgatorio*, culminating in the Earthly Paradise, as Dante's enactment of what Virgil prophesied in his "Messianic" eclogue. He puts Virgilian lines in the mouth of Statius: "The world grows new again; / justice returns and the first human age, / and a new progeny descends from heaven" (22.70-72). In Canto 30, amidst "audacious troping" of another passage from Virgil where Dido recognizes her susceptibility to an "ancient flame," Beatrice descends, "the embodiment of the personal resurrected Christ of his own life" (222). In Dante's *Purgatorio*, says Franke, "poetry is exalted as the model for [an assiduous] human endeavor of self-fashioning in the divine image" (218).

The closing pages of *Dante's Interpretive Journey* promise more to come, concerning the *Paradiso*, about which Franke says little here. That will be welcome, for one misses it in this book. One can hope also for a lightening of the theoretical structure.

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*Editing Texts from the Age of Erasmus.* Edited by Erika Rummel. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. ISBN 0-8020-0797-X. Pp. 102. No price available.

The thirtieth annual Conference on Editorial Problems, "Editing Texts from the Age of Erasmus," which met at the University of Toronto in November 1994, produced the essays here collected by Erika Rummel. The papers presented on that occasion have formed a book which is a memorial to scholarly dedication. They reflect thirty years of work in a variety of contexts since the first of the conferences started in 1965. Projects completed include two registers, those of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Paris and the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the time of John Calvin, and *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*. Further investigations encouraged for scholarly attention involve the *Independent Works of Tyndale*, the records of the Consistory of Geneva, and the *Peter Martyr Library*. In addition, papers provided an opportunity to review the status of two continuing projects—the *Opera Omnia Des. Erasmi* (Amsterdam) and *The Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto). While the published text records the findings of the meeting, it also indicates the extent to which the conference provided both a public-forum report and an opportunity for the smaller group of interested experts to share intellectual resources, exchange ideas, and examine mutual editorial problems.

The order of the chapters in the book reflects the presentation sequence at the conference. James Farge addresses his greater editing purpose with his work in the registers of the Faculty of Theology at Paris in "Texts and Context of a *Mentalité*: The Parisian University Milieu in the Age of Erasmus" (3-24). Motivated by an imbalance of scholarly opinion which endorses humanists over scholastics, Farge argues that this bias comes in part from later attitudes which empathize more with those who reject the status quo and, in part, from the humanists' linguistic competence which makes their writings accessible for editions and translations. In contrast, contemporary scholarship does not have available the written works of their opponents. As a result, their writings are available in modern editions and



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