WILLIAM FRANKE
DANTE'S INTERPRETATIVE JOURNEY
Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 250 pp.

Rarely does an author admit from the outset that his book is not necessarily intended to be read sequentially from beginning to end; Franke does so in his preface much to the delight of some of his readers who may no be prepared, perhaps, for the heavy, densely theoretical nature of the introductory chapter. The major premise of the work, Franke explains, is to create a dialogue between medieval, theological perspectives on interpretation and "the very different assumptions about interpretation which have fundamentally determined the cast of modern thought" (x). If one recognizes Dante's art as primarily an art of interpretation, then the truth out of which the art originates can be interpreted through the mediation of poetry. "Precisely because poetry affords opportunities for interpeting [...] truth, it can enable truth to occur as truth, as the compelling disclosure of an order of signficance and being, rather than only as a trace or remnant of itself in the form of philological object or cultural artifact," Franke argues (3). It is at this juncture of discussing truth and art that the author turns to the theoretical framework of Martin Heidegger, as elaborated by his follower Hans-Georg Gadamer, treating truth as originating in the work of art. Seen in this light, then, truth can interpreted through the act of experiencing Dante's poem. According to Franke, Dante's ***Comedy*** is written in such a way as to demand the active participation of the reader; his truth cannot be accepted merely on his authority alone, even though he has been through this other-worldly experience. The readers and their entire historical world must actively participate in this journey of interpretation.

Experiencing Dante's poem provides the real meat of the book. For Dante the pilgrim, for the readers of the pilgrim's experience, and to a

certain extent also for the readers of Franke's book, the historicity of truth is their defining experience. Since every verse in the ***Divine Comedy*** is open to active interpretation in order for the reader to discover the "truth" hidden behind the veil — an interpretation which Dante himself invites in ***Inferno*** IX — it follows, then, that every discovery reveals a truth which is inextricably bound to the personal experience of the discoverer — the reader. The truth of Dante's text is, following Franke's argument, essentially personal and unique since the truth does not exist in and of itself but can only be experienced through the perception of the reader.

This is not to say that poetry cannot reveal eternal truth. In examining Dante's Statius ***(Purgatorio*** XXI), Franke shows us the shade as he runs behind Dante and Virgil, catching up to them on their way up Mount Purgatory. Through Statius, Franke maintains that Dante "unearths [...] the ground in history of the transcendent truth of Christ [...] revealed through literature understood radically as poetic interpretation" (191). Virgil "guides [him, Statius] in the art of poetry and also lights for him the way to faith [...] Poetry constitutes the historical means by which Statius was led to the Christian truth that transcends history" (209). Dante's own mention of Luke in ***Purgatorio*** XXI reminds us, even before the Statius episode, how personal Luke's experience with Christ is. Dante opens the door for a comparison of Luke and Statius, and Franke makes the best of it, maintaining that much as the gospel of Luke illustrates that the truth of Christ "is revealed in the present experience of believers, each journeying along their personal way [...]" (193), so too the truth of Dante's text is revealed to readers in a unique way to each personal experience.

This book is neither a quick nor an easy read; the prose is dense, and subject matter is difficult under the best of circumstances. Anyone other than a totally engaged reader will find him/herself dangling from one of the many sticky theoretical spider webs spun throughout the text. Yet it is worth the trouble it takes to penetrate the surface of the work. Readers coming from a variety of backgrounds and interests will each carry away his/her own interpretation of truth, historicity, and Dante, much as we do when we dare to break the surface of the ***Divine Comedy.***

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