

William Franke, *Dante's Paradiso and the Theological Origins of Modern Thought: Toward a Speculative Philosophy of Self-Reflection* (London: Routledge, 2021; *The Divine Vision of Dante's Paradiso: The Metaphysics of Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); and *Dante's Vita Nuova and the New Testament: Hermeneutics and the Poetics of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

William Franke has long pursued a line of inquiry that follows up on Dante's constant penchant for theorizing and develops philosophical, theological, and literary-critical reflection continuing in the vein of Dante's own works. In this seventh centenary year of Dante's death in 1321, Franke's work has been crowned by the publication of three major monographs bringing into unified focus the capital importance of Dante for our own time.

The exegesis of Dante is integral to Franke's apophatic philosophy as worked out in another series of books (*On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourse in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, 2 volumes, 2007; *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 2014; *Apophatic Paths from Europe to China: Regions Without Borders*, 2018; *On the Universality of What is Not: The Apophatic Turn in Critical Thinking*, 2020), which proposes also a speculative philosophy of self-reflection. On the basis of apophasis as unlimited self-critique, self-reflection turns a critical eye on the self, dissolving its supposedly static contents into dynamic relations with others. Conjugating speculative self-reflection with the radical negation of apophasis, Franke pursues critical philosophy to the point where, critical of itself, it breaks open into a philosophy and even a theology of revelation as unlimited openness to the Other. The driving force of thought in modern times has been self-reflection, and it can be turned in this self-reflective manner on itself so as to break its frame and open itself to what former epochs of culture understood as manifestation of divinity, the uncanny, and even theological revelation.

The current postmodern and specifically post-secular media revolution comes to sharp focus and a certain transparency when aligned with the revolution in poetic language of preceding centuries, which started for modern times with Dante. Franke's tack is to interpret this communications *revolution* as a mode of *revelation* that demands to be understood in light of theological paradigms including the Trinity and the Incarnation. Dante's intellectual revolution/revelation begins with the *Vita nuova* and culminates in the *Paradiso*, while it is also variously elaborated in every one of Dante's philosophical and theoretical works in between. This trajectory extends further beyond Dante's oeuvre into the tradition he gathers together and makes canonical from classical Greco-Roman and biblical Judeo-Christian antiquity, on the forehand, to the poets that follow in Dante's wake in the vernacular language traditions, on the other hand. Dante's progeny includes essentially all modern poets pursuing the highest aspirations for literature as a revelation of human life and cosmic reality in a phenomenological sense. This sense, however, is best illuminated by reference to theological transcendence, which is thought through most profoundly in the theology of the Trinity as refracted through the self-reflexive poetics of Dante's *Paradiso*.

Self-reflection, as the hallmark of the modern age, originates more profoundly with Dante than with Descartes. Franke's books rewrite modern intellectual history, taking Dante's lyrical language in *Paradiso* as enacting a Trinitarian self-reflexivity that gives a theological spin to the birth of the modern subject. Such an emergence can be described already with the Troubadours when seen retrospectively from the vantage point of Dante. Dante's thought and work indicate an alternative modernity along the path not taken. This alternative shows up in Nicholas of Cusa's conjectural science and in Giambattista Vico's new science of imagination as alternatives to positive empirical science. Franke traces the latter paradigm leading to our techno-scientific culture back to Dante's exact contemporary Duns Scotus (born, like Dante, in 1265) and his new metaphysics based on univocity rather than on the analogy of being and the concomitant analogical vision of the cosmos. He traces Dante's revolution forward to Schelling's philosophy of revelation and to Fichte's essential insight into the limit of reflexive, Kantian philosophy. He delineates Dante's anticipations of Derrida's deconstruction of the sign, as well as of Levinas's ethics of the Other, and Blanchot's discovery of the space of literature in the bursting open of signification to contact experienced as the vision of God (*visio Dei*) in the performances of poetic language at the height of Paradise.

Franke works as a philosopher of the humanities addressing the toughest intellectual problems of our time, including postmodern identity politics versus cosmopolitan conviviality, cognitive science as a challenge to humanistic modes of knowing, intercultural philosophy, etc., in terms of his apophatic philosophy, which also converts into a speculative theology.

The Dante Society of America (DSA) recently recognized Franke's work with this message (12/1/2021) from secretary Christian Dupont: "Dear friends, Fellow member William Franke, professor of comparative literature at Vanderbilt University, has been especially prolific during this 700th anniversary year overlaid by the rigors of Covid. He has published not just one, or even two, but three new monographs—all in continuity with his previous books, which interpret Dante through the lenses of hermeneutic and deconstructive theory, engaging philosophical, theological, and critical reflection upon the thought at work in Dante's poetry and prose in terms informed by the speculative resources of our own era, including media studies, art theory on word and image (iconography), political theology, apophatic poetics, and phenomenology after the theological turn."

These books are unified in their vision of poetry as theological revelation in Dante's work from the lyrical love poems of the *Vita nuova* to the mystical lyric verses of the *Paradiso* and its insistent poetics of ineffability. Among Franke's newest books, the one on self-reflection analyzes the self-reflective structure of lyrical language in its original invention by Dante subsuming Troubadour models and then outlines self-reflection's repercussions through the course of modern cultural history, with its endemic Narcissism. The book maps out an alternative modernity that is already indicated by Dante's invention of self-reflexivity as a reflection of divine (Trinitarian) transcendence.

Franke reads literary classics as revelations of truth that can be valid for us still today. Dante is key for his claim to reveal a theological truth that has universal existential validity beyond sectarian dogmas and culturally specific teachings.

The distinctive achievement of Franke's work—its unique contribution not only to Dante studies but also to the philosophical thought of our time—lies in his treating Dante as engaged in

conversation with the great speculative challenges of all times. Dante addresses the perennial issues of ethics and metaphysics in the terms available to his own age of culture and in poetically specific and concretely historical detail. Dante's medieval cultural horizon and its special terms need to be acknowledged and discerned in order for us to envision the sublime verities revealing humanity and its Others poetically in his work. But to be truly understood they also need to be placed into relation with the speculative issues proper to our own times – our own (self)reflective quest to encounter our Others. Through Franke's mediation, Dante becomes much more than a cultural icon or a historical monument. He stands out as a living voice of prophetic revelation in the present. The inspired truths of his vision belong to all ages, but we constantly lose sight of them, and "the divine vision darkens." Through mediation such as Franke offers, this type of visionary seeing in a perspective of the infinite can and needs to return to consciousness for our own survival, not to mention salvation.