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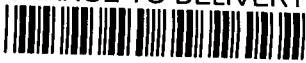
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Alessandro Vettori

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ESSAYS

William Franke. *Dante and the Sense of Transgression: "The Trespass of the Sign."* Bloomsbury, 2013. Pp. 200.

William Franke opens his volume *Dante and the Sense of Transgression: "The Trespass of the Sign"* with a dual motion. While acknowledging the condemnation of transgression integral to the entire narrative of the *Commedia*, Franke centers his attention upon Dante's own habitually transgressive nature, as a radically innovative poet, pilgrim, and public persona alike. The consequent proposal is a reading of *Paradiso* vis-à-vis modern critical conceptualizations of transgression: namely, those of Georges Bataille, Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Michel Foucault, and Emmanuel Levinas. Franke additionally draws upon classical mythology and apophatic theology—from Orpheus to Eckhart—to round out his analysis of Dante's boundary-crossing poetics.

Part One, "Language and Beyond," constructs the foundation for Franke's argument. Herein Franke speaks to Dante's movement towards a "transcendence of language," which culminates in the mystical ineffability of the heavenly realm at which Dante-as-pilgrim arrives. However, in order to convey this arrival textually, Dante must nonetheless make recourse to language, requiring a deconstructive "transgression of the sign" (20). Franke extends the work of Blanchot to *Paradiso*, applying the notion of the *pas au-delà* or "step/not beyond"—a going-forth that simultaneously negates itself—to Dante's ascent past conventional language, sense, and time. The result, according to Franke, is both linguistic-transcendence and -immanence, mediated by the act of attempting to write what exceeds words.

In Part Two, "Authority and Powerlessness (Kensis)," Franke theorizes that Dante's deployment of theological language produces the vision of a dialectical political utopia. The empyrean is characterized by a paradoxical simultaneity of ultimate authority and unconditional freedom, for, as Augustine notes, "ethics would be incongruous in the divine economy" (107). Dante's denunciation of countless priests and ecclesiastical figures throughout the *Commedia* emphasizes this skepticism towards human appropriation of God's moral code, a stance that situates the poet-pilgrim himself as both transgressor (against the tyranny of the worldly Church) and accuser (in service, rather, of supreme law).

Part Three, the final major section of the book, is entitled "Transgression and Transcendence." Franke cites Bataille and Foucault as he contemplates the dissolution of the sacred such that transgression becomes the only viable path to its reclamation. This trajectory is established negatively, marked by both internal illumination and the surpassing of ostensible limits, in alignment with the apophatic tradition invoked throughout the volume. Transgression as Franke formulates it speaks in the space of collapse, comprised not only by crossing but the return to an unknown point of origin:

accordingly, Dante is able to reconcile his own transgressions by absolutizing authority as the inner experience of divine truth. This mode of holy transgressiveness realizes Franke's thesis, as the mystical "step beyond" that Dante carries out is at last the way to God.

The volume closes with an appendix, "Levinasian Transcendence and the Ethical Vision of the *Paradiso*." This conclusion positions Levinas' relational ethics alongside the cosmological outlook found in Dante, situating the latter as an articulation of the most fundamental form of alterity: approaching-God. Though differently, the philosopher and the poet share in the fact of their asymmetrical encounters with an infinite Other. Levinas' neighbor and the Paradise that Dante journeys to and through are unrepresentable; they cannot be wholly known. Nevertheless, both demand an assumption of responsibility by the self. Despite appearing somewhat tangential to the book's argument regarding transgression, the appendix does add depth to Franke's earlier claims around Dante's utmost basis for transgressing mortal limits—namely, an essential and unshakeable faith.

Franke is impressively cogent in placing a broad and complex range of theory into conversation with Dante's no less intricate writings, explaining their bases and identifying nodes of contact without sacrificing nuance or anachronistically warping Dante to his own ends. While he privileges an apophatic reading, Franke does not disavow the many "positive" or cataphatic elements to be found in Dante. The former is clearly the text's intended area of focus, and its conceptual through-lines—medieval theology and French postmodernism—come together to offer a compelling perspective on *Paradiso* as a revolutionary document of the inexpressible. All in all, *Dante and the Sense of Transgression: "The Trespass of the Sign"* exhibits a worthwhile hermeneutical effort, interweaving Dante's timeless work with some of the most significant critical thought of the last century.

PARIS J. B. REID
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**William Franke. *The Divine Vision of Dante's Paradiso: The Metaphysics of Representation*.
Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. 304.**

In the Heaven of Jove, which constitutes Cantos XVIII through XX in Dante's *Paradiso*, the souls in that realm spark and, in the sky, transmit a message of divine justice to Dante the pilgrim. It is this exact moment that William Franke, in *The Divine Vision of*

Dante's Paradiso deems a *visio dei* or “divine vision” for Dante. Franke’s book is a finely focused critical reading of Canto XVIII of *Paradiso* which aims to flesh out how divine vision is represented through the visibility of a text—in this case, the *incipit* of the Book of Wisdom—when the souls convey to Dante, “DILIGITE IUSTITIAM QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM” (*Par.* 18.91-93).

In a brief prologue, Franke outlines his goal for the book as an attempt to frame the visionary moment in Canto XVIII through philosophical reflection. He sees his book as offering a “*lectura Dantis* focused on one heaven of the *Paradiso*, yet it enfolds in embryo a philosophical interpretation of modernity as it emerges from the intellectual and spiritual matrices that Dante discloses in this astonishing and perspicuous epiphany” (xi). In his opening, Franke presents his book as accessible to a number of thinkers interested in the *Commedia*, who might come into Dante scholarship through various points of entry. That being the case, and in order to accommodate as many readers as possible, Franke divides his book into two parts. Part One encompasses the book’s major arguments, grounded in critical and philosophical thought, and for all intents and purposes serves as the main content of the work itself. Part Two offers additional philosophical reflection which Franke calls Excursuses (xii), wherein each Excursus pairs as a kind of commentary for its corresponding chapter in Part One.

Chapter One begins by articulating one of Franke’s central arguments—that is, that the writing in the Heaven of Jove in Canto XVIII of *Paradiso* is in fact a theophany, a *visio dei*. Franke further cements this idea by exploring the theological concept of the Word becoming flesh. In this vein, with God being present in the incarnate Word, Dante for Franke sees Scripture as the literal and visual presence of God (13). Language then is both a medium that mediates the vision of God, and in the visualization of Scripture in Canto XVIII, the embodiment of God himself. Borrowing from Hegel, this idea of mediation allows Dante to place God in the “im-mediacy” of language, ultimately achieving two things. Firstly, Dante for Franke allows God to be seen through the Scripture that is painted into heaven (a kind of visible speech or *visibile parlare*). This helps to reaffirm that God in His perfect divinity cannot be seen by mere humans, with the understanding that we cannot fully comprehend God. Secondly, Dante allows writing and poetry to become the means through which the Divine can be perceived and experienced, thus privileging the act of writing and written language in and of itself.

Chapter Two focuses on the souls in their sparking as also indicating speech. The close interrelatedness for Dante of the words *sfavillare* (“sparking”) and *favellare* (“speaking”) implies not only that there is something inherently sparking about language, but that this is indicative of a chaotic or random ordering out of which we make meaning. This reinforces the Word incarnate in the reverse, as the souls—in enacting language by spelling out the *incipit* for the Book of Wisdom—are incarnating God (69). Franke also

emphasizes the importance of written language itself, as this is indeed what allows Dante to articulate a vision of God. The fact that God is not fully comprehensible through written holy words (what Franke connects to contingency) underscores how impossible perceiving God is (which he links to negative theology). Thus, the author concludes with how important the written word becomes in that vein, and how then Dante's entire *ars poetica* becomes embedded in a divinely necessary reality.

Chapter Three returns to the status of writing not only as a medium or means, but also of an immediate revelation, of God or a symbol of the immediacy of God (87). Most salient in this chapter is Franke's analysis of grammar and specific parts of speech, in their connection to how the vision of God is articulated in this canto (93). Franke argues that Dante saw grammar as the science *par excellence*, through which language finds meaning—a theme he continues in Chapter Four, where he turns to the concept of speculative grammar. Grammar is for Franke, by Dante's time, a complex and logic-driven science (108). In placing the *incipit* of the Book of Wisdom into the heaven depicting for Dante the message of divine justice, Dante has also placed a spotlight on grammar. "[B]y actually picturing grammar as a spectacle rather than only letting it operate invisibly in the making of sense, [Dante] raises awareness of the making of meaning in and through language to a new level" (115). It is therefore in the celebration of the Word—of grammar by which we make meaning out of words—that Dante can emphasize the visual aspect of seeing words as a substitute for the divine presence. Neither one nor the other being more privileged, it is both the Word and the invocation of the image of the Word that are equally important (128).

Chapter Five highlights the emphatic language of Dante in Canto XIX concerning the Eagle speaking and whirling, and Dante's insistence on this as an image. Moving away from the imagistic quality of words to invoke Scripture in Canto XVIII, Franke focuses here on the Eagle as an image—as capable of being seen through sign becoming an image. Lest we forget, the Eagle is borne out of the final letter of the Divine Vision/Message, that last '*emme*' (138-39). Central to this chapter though is the emphasis on the synesthetic quality of Dante's language (156-57). Moreover, Dante's documented experience of his journey serves as an invocation to the reader to experience the words of the text through their imagistic and sonic potential.

Finally, Chapter Six offers a brief summary of the book to this point, recapitulating the various claims made in each chapter. In a final flourish on the original argument around mediation, Franke asserts that the process of mediation in which language is mediating the experience of seeing God is infinite, just as language and the process through which meaning is made is also infinite (183). To end though, language for Dante has always had a limit in its ability to describe which is why Dante repeatedly invokes the aspect of ineffability. Yet even ineffability must contend with Dante's grasping

remembrance of the ultimate vision of the trinity, the love and the “center that moves the sun and the other stars” (187).

The Excurses in Part Two, as aforementioned, work as a compendium to the main body of the text. Each Excurses matches its corresponding chapter and provides an expansion on the specific philosophical, theological, and theoretical musings of that same chapter. To look more closely into each Excurses, then, is to square the circle for Franke’s modality of reading Dante’s *Commedia*. For example, in Excurses One (which expands on Chapter One), Franke examines more closely Saussure’s idea of language to help further elucidate the ways in which language as a medium creates in its “immediacy” for Franke the Divine Vision in Canto XVIII. (We must remember that hinging upon Franke’s argument is the concept that –from the beginning of Dante’s work–writing, the written word, and its mystical appearance vis-à-vis the souls in the Heaven of Jove are stand-ins for a vision of God.)

While Franke pronounces that this work is accessible to a wide array of Dante scholars, and though a great number of deeper philosophical inquiry is subordinated to the Excurses, the main body of the text remains incredibly dense and difficult to parse. As a means through which to engage with Dante (vis-à-vis Hegel, Derrida, Wittgenstein, etc.), *The Divine Vision of Dante’s Paradiso*, certainly offers a new reading of the *Commedia*, a thorough depiction of the Heaven of Jove, and provides forays into looking at the more mystical and esoteric aspects of Dante’s *magnum opus*. In addition, Franke provides for an English-reading audience several German sources and commentaries of Dante that aren’t typically featured. That aside, it does at times seem that the density of language, and the appeal to philosophical terms which are not always explained, obfuscates rather than elucidates what is otherwise a novel and incredibly interesting reading of a very specific moment in Dante’s *Commedia*. Still, I would highly recommend this work to those readers interested in examining Dante through the lens of philosophy and literary theory, as well as for those scholars interested in Dante’s connection to mysticism.

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**Bianca Garavelli. *Dante. così lontano, così vicino.*
Giunti, 2021. Pp. 256.**

Uscito nel settembre 2021, pochi mesi prima dalla sua prematura morte, *Dante così lontano, così vicino* è l’esito del riadattamento editoriale di un progetto destinato a delle letture pubbliche. Secondo quanto dichiarato dall’autrice durante un’intervista

radiofonica con Massimo Maugeri, il libro è stato strutturato secondo una divisione per grandi tematiche, pensata per accompagnare lettori e lettrici in un'esplorazione orizzontale della Divina Commedia, diversa dal percorso canonico che segue il viaggio temporale dantesco dall'Inferno al Paradiso.

Già dall'introduzione "Dante e il terzo millennio" e dalla domanda posta in apertura "Che cosa succederebbe se Dante si risvegliasse oggi e rivivesse nel nostro mondo?" è possibile capire l'intenzione di Bianca Garavelli, decisa a utilizzare la poetica dantesca come filtro per tematizzare problemi e risorse dell'attualità. Dante viene definito ambientalista, innovativo, nomade, profetico: un uomo che conosce molte lingue, con una vita movimentata e un'intelligenza così viva da esser in grado di rielaborare gli elementi della sua cultura in esiti sempre innovativi, a partire dall'invenzione della sua "nuova" lingua volgare.

Nel primo capitolo "Ombre e luci nella Divina Commedia", l'autrice descrive un poeta in viaggio fra mondi letterari, libero di giocare con le fonti e aperto a ogni tipo di influenza: dai classici virgiliani alle opere di altre culture, anche imprevedibili fino a metà del secolo scorso, come il *Libro della Scala*, un'opera dell'escatologia islamica che probabilmente poté leggere in una sua traduzione in francese e latino grazie al maestro Brunetto Latini. In Bianca Garavelli è evidente l'influenza dall'opera di Maria Corti, di cui seguì i corsi all'Università di Pavia e che divenne la sua relatrice di tesi.

Nel secondo capitolo "Il poema 'ecologico'" si dà spazio all'importanza che gli elementi naturali rivestono nella poetica di Dante. Non si tratta solo di conoscenze astronomiche derivanti dagli studi del Quadrivio, ma di saperi dovuti a un'attenta osservazione di ciò che lo circondava e anche, secondo l'autrice, da quel moto d'amore che può nascere solo in chi ammira la bellezza della natura come manifestazione del divino, ravvivandone la fede. Dante conosce le proprietà delle pietre, che utilizza in metafore e similitudini; si rivela un grande conoscitore degli animali, soprattutto dei volatili, e l'autrice ci mostra una serie di passi della Divina Commedia in cui il lessico della fauna viene usato come una tavolozza per creare immagini suggestive degli incontri con le anime dell'aldilà, aiutando così l'immaginazione di chi legge.

Nella geografia di paesaggi che Dante costruisce per i suoi mondi ultraterreni, sono i fiumi a giocare un ruolo fondamentale, che Bianca Garavelli definisce "vene della terra". Tutte le personalità più solenni vengono omaggiate dalla descrizione paesaggistica dei loro luoghi d'origine: Francesca, Cunizza da Romano, Carlo Martello, papa Adriano V, San Francesco, Virgilio, fino ad arrivare ai due fiumi che delimitano il territorio abitato da Matelda, quel Paradiso Terrestre in cui Dante può finalmente rincontrare Beatrice e che segna la parte finale della sua purificazione, prima dell'ascesa al Paradiso. Il pregio di questa parte del libro è sicuramente quello di riunire sotto il tema ecologico diverse parti