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THE HARVARD UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR ITALIAN RENAISSANCE STUDIES

William Franke

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Transmedial Transmissions: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Cult of the Vita Nuova
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Biography

William Franke is a philosopher of the humanities, a Dante scholar, and a professor of comparative literature at Vanderbilt University. He has also been professor of philosophy at University of Macao (2013-2016); Fulbright-University of Salzburg Distinguished Chair in Intercultural Theology (2005-06); and Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung research fellow (1994-95). His book *Dante's Paradiso and the Theological Origins of Modern Thought: Toward a Speculative Philosophy of Self-Reflection* received the Hermes Award: Book of the Year in Phenomenological Hermeneutics from The International Institute for Hermeneutics (IIH), 2021 and he became Honorary Professor (Profesore Honoris Causa) of the Agora Hermeneutica.

Project Summary

The truth of the work, as determined by its origin in personal existence, is fully revealed and realized only through interpretation by other individuals reading it in other contexts in relation to their own personal experience in the course of a history of reception. *La Vita Nuova* can stand as emblematic of this process and as illustrative of its exceptionally fecund results in literary history. Often touted as the first book of Italian literary tradition, *La Vita Nuova* is a seed of the very process of a literary tradition disseminating

itself through ongoing production of works as responses answering to a progenitor text. Dante himself invites and initiates such a chain of responses by circulating the sonnet about his initiatory dream to fellow poets and asking for their interpretation of its meaning. Especially revealing of the history engendered by this text are its artistic appropriations at various periods in the iconographical tradition. The Pre-Raphaelite depictions, notably by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, illustrate how subjectively driven interpretation can become relevant to revealing the original meaning of a text but as temporally unbounded, as renewed in an ongoing series of remakes reaching into an open future. Rossetti's, like Dante's, personal preoccupations prove instrumental for disclosing and illuminating what can be lived as perennial and perduring truths about human existence. Most revealing is the way that shifting between written and visual media opens a gap in which something unrepresentable in either medium alone can be intimated.