Helleman, Wendy Elgersma. 2010.  

The focus of Wendy Helleman's stimulating monograph is considerably wider than its title would suggest. Helleman's stated aim is to bring Solovyov’s mystical Sophia, as the “absolute unity of being” (19) and “goal of the historical process” (18), into closer alignment with the “lady of great beauty” (20) embraced by the Russian Symbolists and informed by Dante's Beatrice. The argument, however, opens up to address a great variety of topics, among them the many traditions of feminine personification of wisdom, Dante's general influence on Solovyov within the Russian 19th century, and Solovyov's complex, syncretic conception of Sophia in the context of the multiple literary and philosophical worlds he attempted to synthesize over the course of his career.

The notion of wisdom, broadly conceived, drives the discussion, and Helleman begins with a survey of the respective lives and works of Dante and Solovyov from the point of view of their engagement with this question. In this context, she provides a concise yet extensive history of the feminine personification of wisdom, from Proverbs to Pythagoras, to Plato, Gnosticism, and finally to Kabbalistic thought and European esotericism. Hereafter the focus closes in, first on Russia's encounter with Dante (chapter 2), and then, more specifically, on Solovyov's direct citations of Dante's writing. An in-depth discussion of Solovyov's views concerning “free theocracy” in light of Dante's political thought (chapter 3) is followed by a general overview of Dante's influence on Solovyov's poetry, aesthetic views and later ethical writing (chapter 4).

Having established Dante’s importance for Solovyov, Helleman turns her attention to the latter’s concept of Sophia. She presents a meticulous reading of his early dialogue La Sophia (chapter 5), and then takes us through Solovyov's lifelong engagement with this controversial and enigmatic (sometimes feminine, sometimes androgynous) figure, alongside Dante’s own complex relationship with Beatrice (chapter 6). The crux of the argument lies in Helleman's examination of Beatrice and Sophia together (chapter 7) in which she emphasizes Dante's and Solovyov's shared rootedness in Platonism, evident in their conceptions of wisdom as enacted by the lover's ascent toward divine beauty (chapter 7). Here Helleman notes an important difference in the two approaches, namely, that Dante raises an actual woman toward the heavens by discovering otherworldly beauty in her, whereas Solovyov begins with a “remote being” (255) and attempts to instantiate her in the world. The
final thrust of the argument examines Dante’s (and Petrarch’s) treatment of Mary as potentially influential in Solovyov’s conception of Sophia (chapter 8).

As is evident from such an overview, the project houses several simultaneous emphases, the most prominent being 1) Solovyov’s notion of divine wisdom, 2) Solovyov’s interest in Dante, and 3) comparison of Beatrice and Sophia. While these projects all touch naturally upon each other, the need to combine them into one coherent undertaking leads to some structural confusion. For example, while painstakingly establishing Dante’s influence on Solovyov in various areas of thought, Helleman explicitly denies any claim for exclusive influence in terms of Solovyov’s personification of Sophia, since Solovyov, a comprehensive reader, would hardly have encountered feminine personification of wisdom solely through Dante. As a result, there is an inherent self-contradiction in the flow of the argument, as is evident in the author’s initial statement of purpose: “comparison, or influence of the earlier author on Solovyov is not [the book’s] primary intention. Its main goal is to explore […] evidence of [Solovyov’s] acquaintance with Dante and the significance of Dante’s work for his own projects” (32).

Throughout, Helleman displays extraordinary breadth of interdisciplinary expertise in Western intellectual history from ancient to Romantic, as well as in Russian 19th- and 20th-century culture. She writes with exceptional clarity of style and stays close to the primary texts, never losing sight of her chosen authors as both thinkers and artists. Her emphasis upon Solovyov as a literary thinker allows us to consider the problem of literary allegory that lies at the root of Solovyov’s philosophical journey. As Helleman points out, for Dante as poet and troubadour, there is no problem imagining Beatrice as an allegorical instantiation of divine wisdom. Solovyov, on the other hand, disliked literary allegory and thirsted for Sophia not as an abstract, metaphorical idea, but as “a living being, a living reality” (49). In this sense, Helleman shows us how the literary problem of personification or embodiment—the “theurgic task of the poet” (50)—lies at the very heart of Solovyov’s passionate vision of “integral” philosophy.

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