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/ Archives (<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr/issue/archive>)

/ 2018 Reviews (<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr/issue/view/1570>) / Reviews

18.12.06, Stern, Dante's Philosophical Life

The Medieval Review (<http://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr>) 18.12.06

Stern, Paul. *Dante's Philosophical Life: Politics and Human Wisdom in Purgatorio*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. pp. 292. ISBN: 978-0-8122-5011-4 (hardback).

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In *Dante's Philosophical Life*, Paul Stern reads the *Divine Comedy* as deploying Christian theology in the service of a philosophical project aimed at stimulating and refining the reader's desire for self-knowledge. Stern's interpretation is rooted in the conviction that the *Purgatorio* both rests upon and discloses a conception of human nature as being "broken" in such a way that gives rise to the "distinctive and distinctively worthy aspects of our humanity" (47). In particular, Stern argues, *Purgatorio* depicts human brokenness as a product of embodiment that results in an awareness of our individual selves as potential knowers of our own desires. Therefore, although love is the impetus that drives all of our motions, the fact that the self is a product of its desires for objects it represents to itself as external to it means that happiness is possible for us only to the extent that self-reflection refines and regulates our orientations toward our own desires. For this reason, Stern argues that *Purgatorio* emphasizes the ethical and intellectual significance of prudence--the virtue most intimately associated with self-knowledge--over and above theoretical or scientific knowledge in its conception of the possibility and necessity of human wisdom for happiness. Consequently, according to Stern, this conception of human nature is illustrated in the drama of the pilgrim's difficult and uncertain progress through the poem as well as reenacted by the reader in the activity of reading and interpreting this drama (115).

Key to Stern's understanding of the poem's capacity to stimulate its readers' cultivation of prudence is his unwavering hermeneutic strategy of treating the text as highly "dissimulative"--a strategy that highlights the significance of ironic tensions between literal and figurative meanings in the text. Stern acknowledges that some instances of these dissimulations in *Purgatorio* may be a product of Dante's

intention to conceal its heterodoxy. However, more important than this, Stern argues that these techniques are crucial to the success of the text both because they stimulate the readers' engagements with it as an intellectual puzzle and because they accommodate the text to the fundamental inequality of the ethical and intellectual conditions in which readers come to it (246).

Although Stern identifies several dissimulative techniques in *Purgatorio*, the one that features most prominently in his analysis concerns the dramatic interactions between the pilgrim and the penitents throughout the text. For Stern almost no character in the canticle can be trusted to offer a clear articulation of a privileged doctrinal view on the matters she or he is discussing. Reading the characters of the *Divine Comedy* in this way is by no means a novel tactic, especially where the characters in *Inferno* are concerned. However, Stern's suspicion of the speakers in *Purgatorio* is not rooted merely in his conviction that the speakers are depicted as being deficient in their understandings of their own ethical and intellectual conditions. Rather, Stern also maintains that this suspicion is encouraged because the *Divine Comedy* persistently sacrifices the possibility of establishing even its own doctrinal authority on behalf of its protreptic aims. For these reasons, Stern's suspicion of the speakers in *Purgatorio* is considerably more pronounced than is typical for interpretations of this canticle.

Stern's treatment of Virgil's situation is especially noteworthy in this regard. The urge to provide an apology for Dante's depiction of Virgil's fate is perennial in Dante studies, but the usual tactic is to point to Virgil's professed lack of faith as the sufficient condition that results in his damnation. Stern's analysis emphasizes a very different sort of intellectual failure, however. In particular, Stern reads Virgil not as a poet-philosopher but as a theorist who is "insufficiently alive to the implications of his own doings" (143) and whose account of the cause of human misery "suffers from the abstractness generated by the theorist's eagerness for the unity of all things" (141). Consequently, according to Stern, the pilgrim is continually left unsatisfied by Virgil's discussions of human nature and it is left for the reader to discern the genuine import of these interactions by attending to the frustration and dissatisfaction that results from the methodological approach that this depiction of Virgil would have us emulate.

The impact of Stern's unusual approach to Virgil reverberates in his discussion of Statius as well. Given Stern's emphasis on Virgil's failure to attend to the brokenness of human nature rather than on his status as a pagan, it is perhaps not surprising that Stern does not emphasize Statius' description of Virgil's role in his secret conversion to Christianity and instead focuses more attention on the "exoticism" of other features of Dante's depiction of Statius' articulation of his intellectual development (174-180).

Nevertheless, the question that Statius' specific references to Virgil's capacity to guide others with a revelatory light that he cannot himself see (*Purg.* 22.64-73) deserve more attention in Stern's account, particularly since the passages in which Statius discusses his relationship to Virgil are so pregnant where the issue of the *Divine Comedy*'s own truth claims and the relationship between faith, love, and self-understanding are concerned.

In a similar vein, precisely because Stern's suspicion of the motivations and self-knowledge of the various speakers in *Purgatorio* is one of the key hermeneutic strategies at work in his analysis, one noteworthy exception to his otherwise consistent application of this technique is his discussion of Beatrice. As is typical in Dante scholarship, Beatrice's speeches are not critically examined for the possibility that they might present the sorts of inner tensions of the sort emphasized in the treatment of other speakers. While this seems like a safe tendency given her explicit role in the poem (*Purg.* 30.73;

Stern 228-229), nevertheless it may be worth at least raising the question of whether and why there might not be occasions in which Beatrice--who, Stern acknowledges, "remains veiled" in the poem (228)--is depicted duplicitously or as being duplicitous in her own right.

Notwithstanding these opportunities for further discussion, Stern's analysis of the poem is clear, well-argued, and thorough. Stern's appeals to Aristotle and other philosophical resources are helpful and handled in a manner that will aid all readers, especially those who are less familiar with these sources. Above all, Stern's basic hermeneutic strategy pays great dividends because it allows him to analyze familiar terrain in fresh ways. Still, a word ought to be said about two of the explicit goals of the book with respect to Dante studies as well as the *Divine Comedy's* lasting significance outside of the narrower confines of academic debates about it.

Regarding the first of these aims, Stern asserts that American Dante scholarship of the last fifty years interprets the religious intention of the *Divine Comedy* in a way that "renders anomalous the meaning and importance that the poem give to politics" (2). It should be noted that the value of Stern's book in no way depends on whether or not this is an accurate description of the state of the field today. But, in any case, in order to provide leverage for his efforts to correct this perceived imbalance in the field, Stern's approach often seems on the verge of asserting that Dante subordinates Christianity's purposes to secular philosophical aims, "employing Christianity's theological possibilities to enlist it as an ally in his campaign against the obstacles to the desire for truth" (161). This does not mean that Stern ends up explicitly arguing that Christianity is a mere mythology for Dante. Indeed Stern is also at pains to say that "Dante seeks to preserve intact Christianity's power to elevate humanity's sights, deepen self-understanding, and make salient the question of humanity's place in the whole" (12). Nevertheless, one is easily left with the impression that Stern regards Dante's approach to Christianity as an implicit critique of its political and philosophical possibilities. However, the question of the scope and purpose of this critique of Christianity warrants further development, especially since Stern's project requires that he address the question of the grounds for the *Divine Comedy's* truth claims--a matter as contentious as any in Dante scholarship throughout at least the last seventy years (since Nardi at least) and that runs much deeper than the question the meanings and relative statuses of philosophy and theology within the poem.

The second aim warrants a different consideration. Stern's arguments about how to read the poem offer a fruitful engagement with major themes in Dante scholarship, and it is a book born of such care and thoughtfulness that it deserves to shape future debates in this field of study. But Stern also evidently wishes for us to read both the *Divine Comedy* and his interpretation of it as an intervention in broader and more fundamental issues that confront us in our contemporary political landscape--especially in response to what Stern regards as the two opposing *Weltanschauungen* of "modern science and postmodernism." To be fair to Stern, these claims are offered exclusively in the opening and closing pages of the book, and so it is doubtful that he would expect anyone to be convinced of these points on the basis of such a glancing treatment. However, what does call for attention here is the risk that Stern's intention to deploy an interpretation of *Purgatorio* against these supposed worldviews tacitly shapes his hermeneutic strategies, especially his tendency to deemphasize theological considerations in his analyses. This is not at all intended to imply that Stern's concerns about contemporary political realities have no place in his analyses; his own discussion of human nature indicates why he would rightly regard it as folly to pretend to adopt a presuppositionless, apolitical hermeneutic framework. However, it is precisely because of my admiration for the book that I feel obliged to point out that, on Stern's own terms, we must strive as far as possible to develop an awareness of our own convictions as being, at best,

non-false errors through which we must strive to understand ourselves. Greater suspicion regarding the significance of Stern's concerns with contemporary political realities may therefore be warranted if we are to keep faith with and appreciate the potential significance of Stern's contribution to the study of Dante's *Purgatorio*.

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2018 Reviews (<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr/issue/view/1570>)

Section

Reviews

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