

Zygmunt G. Barański and Martin McLaughlin, eds. *Dante the Lyric and Ethical Poet: Dante lirico e etico*.

Legenda. London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2010. xiv + 246 pp. index. \$89.50. ISBN: 978-1-906540-04-3.

Despite the many questions of a moral character permeating the *Comedy*, ethical debates are often avoided by Dante scholars at the expense of rhetorical and stylistic approaches. To make up for this, the anthology, edited by the distinguished scholars Zygmunt G. Baranski and Martin McLaughlin, focuses on ethical aspects of Dante's works. The book consists of proceedings of the fifth and final meeting of the International Dante Seminar, and the papers, written partly in English and partly in Italian, address four major topics: Dante as an ethical poet, Dante as a lyric poet, Dante and the *Eclogues*, and Dante in nineteenth-century Britain. However, if one takes the adjectives from the title as a hendiadys rather than as oppositions, the main objective of all these topics is how ethics and poetry are inseparable.

The book opens with an excellent chapter by Claire E. Honess about the nexus between poetry, politics, and ethics in *De vulgari eloquentia* and the *Comedy*. She argues that the *Comedy* may be read as a political satire as well as an ethical text, and as such it connects both the highest and the lowest level in man's quest according to the Aristotelian tripartition of man's soul. According to Honess, the *Comedy* connects the useful to the virtuous. However, one questionable presumption of

Honess's argumentation is that politics and ethics are contrasting perspectives, while she overlooks how these perspectives seem to converge in the theological view of the *Comedy*.

The second chapter, written by Paolo Falzone, discusses the complex relationship between nature and grace presented in Dante's philosophical tract, the *Convivio*. The argumentation is good, but because there is always a tension between Dante's philosophical work and his poetry, in which the poetry obscures every question that philosophy clarifies, the discussion would probably have taken another direction if the author had passed from the *Convivio* to Dante's poetry. In the third essay, written by Robin Kirkpatrick and George Corbet, we return to the *Comedy*. The chapter presents a fresh comparative reading of the *Comedy* and the philosophy of Alasdair McIntyre. The outcome of such a reading is a strong focus on the Aristotelian aspects, the training of the intellectual virtues, in Dante's thinking. The divided will, though, which is so often dramatized in the *Comedy* as unable to follow the virtues of the mind, and which more than anything else marks the transition from a classical to a Christian ethical debate, is strangely never considered.

After the first three chapters, a section follows that focuses on *Vita nova*. Of the three essays here the second, by Justin Steinberg, deserves emphasis: it is the strongest and most original chapter in this volume, and makes it a significant contribution to modern Dante scholarship. In a well-argued and well-documented approach, Steinberg discusses Dante's dreams in *Vita nova* and the author's use of dreams to explore questions of truth and fiction. Above all, Steinberg sheds new light on the debate between Dante and Dante da Maiano by demonstrating how Dante incorporated da Maiano's medical rejection of the poet's allegorical interpretations of dreams. Steinberg discusses further how an experience of radical humility caused Dante to reevaluate the status of disease-induced visions just as he reevaluated the status of suffering and death. Steinberg's great strength is the inclusion of a theological perspective, in addition to philological, rhetorical, and stylistic analyses. Much contemporary Dante scholarship, including this volume, often lack such perspectives, even though they are essential to reach a more profound sense of Dante's poetic and ethical force: the *Comedy* brings together the entire spectrum of human knowledge, and confronts the reader with a series of different perspectives simultaneously.

Of the three essays about Dante and the *Eclogues*, Lino Pertile's contribution is the most important. But all tend to overlook the ethical perspectives, focusing instead on rhetorical and philological analyses. The volume ends, however, with an uplifting essay by Michael Caesar about the influence of Dante over the Victorian poet, James Thomson, while the concluding chapter consists of an informative presentation of Thomas Moore's contribution to the rise of Dante Studies.

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