

# interpretation

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Volume 12 number 1

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## Short Notices

WILL MORRISEY

**Plato's *Phaedo*: An Interpretation.** By Kenneth Dorter. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982. xi + 233 pp.: cloth, \$28.50.)

Myths are for children; Dorter suggests that this fact may point to the significance of Plato's absence during Socrates' last, mythologizing, hours. Dorter finds "the problem of scepticism" central to "themes most associated with Plato"; the *Phaedo* is "pre-eminently about the theme of bondage and liberation," that is, about the way a few men can be liberated from myths and the way others may be partially liberated by the right myths. Dorter combines the "analytic" and "dramatic" methods to interpret the dialogue, avoiding the method that attempts to describe Platonic dialogues as reflections of their 'time,' that myth.

Dorter observes that Platonic myths guard reason instead of undermining it. Everyone begins life ruled by the body's desires, and the body is "the realm where reality is proximally though inadequately made manifest." Thus one cannot be liberated from the body by denying the body any more than by indulging it (or, as in some traditions, sanctifying it); liberation begins by not taking the body too seriously. Mere de-mythologizing, the accumulation of knowledge, will not suffice. While myths embody ideas, they also abstract from the desires of the body. If well-made, they can moderate unphilosophic souls. Only wisdom, the subordination of all other motivations to reason, "resolves the antagonism between form and corporeality by placing them in an ordered relationship where form is the essential truth of corporeality."

In attempting to discover this essential truth, the reasoning soul must avoid misleading analogies, such as conceiving of the relationship of body and soul as modeled on the relationship of cause and effect in the physical world. Too many misleading analogies, if refuted, can yield misology, itself a symptom of "bondage to the physical."

Reason, *logos*, comes first through words, *logoi*; the bases of the *logoi* in nature are the forms, whose basis is "the good." Dorter knows that this formulation tends toward circularity because the theory of the forms posits something ("the good") that it cannot clarify. Also, the theory of the forms does not account for physical causation. Thus the forms are problematic both in respect to the 'higher' (the one good) and the 'lower' (the many particulars). Not myths but numbers are between the forms and the particulars. The soul bears the forms to the body with the preliminary aid of mathematics—a theory consistent with neither the religious notion of *ex nihilo* creation nor the modern scientific notion of entropy.

Dorter refuses to allow his readers to confuse this problematic theory with scepticism. That “it is a persistent theme in the dialogues that wisdom is not wholly accessible to mortals” does not mean that wisdom itself is a lie, noble or otherwise. He concludes the book with what he calls a speculative chapter, in which he defines Platonic soul as both energy and mind (itself combining reason and sensation). Unlike the appetites, reason orients us toward the object considered, not toward the thinking subject; it wants to understand what is true, not how objects affect us. Energy, the “world-soul,” has “intrinsic existence independent of a perceiving consciousness”; “one can impute reason to the natural order without conceiving this reason as personality or consciousness.” The well-ordered, erotic individual soul maintains the body while achieving that “consciousness of the eternal present” that links it to the energetic “world-soul”—both striving, perhaps, toward “the good.”

By reenacting Plato’s thought and extending its action, Dorter enhances Plato’s continuing presence.

**Averroës’ Three Short Commentaries on Aristotle’s “Topics,” “Rhetoric,” and “Poetics.”** Edited and translated by Charles E. Butterworth. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977. ix + 206 pp.: cloth, \$30.00.)

Averroës’ name, synonymous with scepticism, might better be associated with coherent scepticism’s only basis: a rigorous standard for the establishment of certainty. These commentaries form part of a series of commentaries on Aristotelian treatises, the majority of which concern logic. In them, Averroës measures not only the Koran’s teachings in accordance to a logical hierarchy; he measures Aristotle’s teachings, as well.

Aristotle’s *Topics* concerns dialectic. Whereas Aristotle regarded dialectic as a means of bringing the many partial opinions up to the standard of truth, and even as a means of examining “the ultimate bases or grounds of each science” [101a25–101b2], Averroës regards dialectic’s materials (opinions) too weak to support philosophic certainty. In particular, induction cannot yield such certainty because the necessity of the universal cannot be proven by collecting some or even all the particulars; induction cannot demonstrate. Dialectical training “seems unnecessary for the perfection of the demonstrative arts.”

Rhetoric ranks still lower in the hierarchy, as it does for Aristotle. But Aristotle regards rhetoric based on enthymeme as at least partly reasonable, not merely useful; this may coincide with his well-known advice that one should seek “as much clearness as the subject matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts” (*Nichomachean Ethics*, 1094b3). Averroës tolerates imprecision less, perhaps because in his day certain “dialectical theologians” defended Islam with enthymemes. Averroës also goes so far as to cast doubt on rhetoric’s

“most powerful” nonsyllogistic technique, testimony—the basis of most theories, dialectical or otherwise.

Poetry ranks below rhetoric. “[S]peeches [that] cause something to be imagined are not speeches [that] make its essence understood.” Butterworth observes that Moslems often regard the Koran as “the best example of poetic excellence in Arabic.” He might add that, unlike Aristotle, Averroës does not here contrast poetry to history. In this hierarchy, poetry has no inferior.

Butterworth’s candid, astute introduction serves not merely to introduce the reader to the texts but to illuminate them in their entirety, or very close to their entirety. In addition, he provides a careful English translation, extensive notes, three indices (of names, of titles, and of technical words), and the Arabic texts: all the assistance contemporary readers will need to renew Averroës’ thought in their own minds.

**Dissidence et philosophie au moyen âge: Dante et ses antécédents.** By E. L. Fortin. (Montreal: Bellarmin, and Paris: J. Vrin, 1981. 201 pp.: paper, \$13.50.)

Artful self-contradiction and even syllogisms left incomplete enable philosophic writers to suggest unpopular thoughts to some readers. But poetic writing poses a dilemma for careful readers. Is the self-contradicting poet rational? Does he aspire to reason? Or does he believe something ‘because’ it is absurd? (Walt Whitman put it with equanimity: “Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself. . . .”)

Dante appears to bring fewer problems in this respect than, for example, Shakespeare does. Dante celebrates reason. But he also celebrates Christianity, founded in part on the teaching that philosophic wisdom is folly. Does the poet who celebrates reason and Christianity subvert Christianity or baptize reason? How can anyone find out?

Fortin opposes the majority of today’s medievalists, who regard Dante as a poetical Aquinas. More than one-third of the pages here consist of scholarly assurances that such a thing as “the politic mode of philosophy” exists. (Although contemporary scholars readily accept the existence of mystical esotericism, rational esotericism seems much more improbable to many of them.) Fortin discusses al-Farabi, Averroës, and Maimonides, tracing their kind of writing to Plato. He recounts the condemnation of Aristotle’s works in 1277 by the Bishop of Paris, Étienne Tempier. He prudently observes that Siger and Boethius, Aristotle’s ill-fated medieval apologists, “had not sufficiently reflected upon the human and social conditions of philosophy”; their excessive candor almost invited the Bishop’s revenge.

In *Paradiso*, Dante represents Siger’s sole wrong as the teaching of “truths susceptible to stirring up the malevolence or envy of his contemporaries,” in Fortin’s words. This is one of several Dantean teachings that might stir malevo-

lence or envy against Dante, were they not seemingly overwhelmed by far more numerous pieties. Fortin refuses to be overwhelmed—even to the extent of writing that Dante regarded political philosophy as “this master discipline” less than twenty pages after quoting Dante’s slightly different assertion that political philosophy is the “master of public things.” Such well-shaded imprecision, coupled with the necessarily selective approach to evidence that the brevity of his interpretation requires, will surely not force “apologists for the orthodox Christianity of the poem [to] . . . admit their impotence before this opaque residue that ceaselessly comes to trouble our [!] repose and puts all in question.” Those apologists have their own reservoirs of ingenuity.

Nonetheless, Fortin’s strength will force some readers to look at the *Commedia* with more care, and more scepticism. He recognizes that a conclusive interpretation would have to show how the whole poem works; perhaps he will write such an interpretation, or induce another to write one.