



Solovyov's Sophia As a Nineteenth-Century Russian Appropriation of Dante's Beatrice

Wendy Elgersma Helleman

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This study argues for a broadened approach to understanding Solovyov's Sophia, reading her against the backdrop of Dante's presentation of Beatrice. It re-examines a reading of Sophia by early twentieth century Russian symbolists, who conflated her figure with those of Beatrice and the Virgin Mary. This work finds the symbolist approach to be a mis-reading of Solovyov, for his approach shows clear participation in romanticism, particularly on the theme of love and androgyny, and in aesthetics. For Solovyov, romanticism also meant a rejection of personification. For romantics the lady, as object of love, is historical, or literal. Symbolists, on the other hand, appreciated symbols and (allegorical) personification. Even so, in practice, Solovyov accepted personification of Sophia, as an implementation of the theurgical task of incarnation of the divine in mortal, bodily reality. In the search for aspects of Dante's work which would have attracted Solovyov, beyond his explicit citation of Dante, and use of the *De monarchia* for a 'free theocracy', our study uncovers a common basis, particularly on love and beauty, in Christian Platonism; this can be traced to Plato's *Symposium* and Christian adaptation in fourth century Augustine and thirteenth century Bonaventure (in his exemplarism). The troubadour theme of love for the lady, adapted by Dante as an expression of love for God, is also integral to Solovyov's own theurgical explanation of love. Analysis of that theme in Solovyov, particularly from the recently published manuscript "La Sophia", shows that his mystical appreciation of Sophia does not represent the gnosticizing dualism which he is thought to have accepted. It is monistic, in the Neoplatonic tradition of Plotinus; duality is only a phase in the dialectic of love. Recognition of Solovyov's Platonism is also helpful in dealing with the difficult question of Sophia's divine status, which is like that of Plato's Ideas, or the ideal world which (since Middle Platonism) was understood to represent the divine Mind and archetypal paradigms which would serve as a blueprint for creation.

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