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The Consolation of Boethius for Dante the Poet and Pilgrim

Submitted by: Gian Martinelli

Although Dante incorporates many of the great medieval thinkers into his final canticle, few are more represented than Boethius in the Circle of Mars. As we progress through Mars, we get a sense that Dante is using the ideas of Boethius as a support for himself as both a pilgrim and poet. As a poet, Dante seems to be inspired by the connections between his life and the life of Boethius. This connection is explored in deeper detail through a discourse on Fortune and wisdom. For Boethius, an abandonment of the wheel of Fortune leads to a life devoted to the good. In this way, Dante the poet identifies with Boethius' initial bitterness to loss, but ultimate gain in transcending Fortune. As a pilgrim, Dante develops intellectually as Cacciaguida recapitulates the Boethian solution to the problem between divine foreknowledge and human free will. Indeed, the argument serves as a preparation for the pilgrim before his bittersweet future is revealed. By the end of the journey through Mars, we see that Dante has combined these two perspectives through the Boethian claim that everything is done for the sake of the good.

There is no question of the presence of Boethius in the Circle of Mars. As the poem makes clear, this realm is for the warriors and crusaders of Christianity who lost their lives for their faith. While Boethius is already in the Circle of the Sun with the great sages, there is much in his life that shows similarities with someone like Cacciaguida. In the tenth canto, Thomas Aquinas describes Boethius' deliverance from suffering. As Aquinas puts it, "to this peace / he came from exile and from martyrdom," (Dante 123, ls. 128-129). This description is nearly identical to the description

Cacciaguida gives of his own death in the fifteenth canto. Cacciaguida claims that "from martyrdom I came to this, my peace" (182, l. 148). In seeing the similar description of these two figures, their identities take on a metaphorical unity. That is to say, Cacciaguida becomes a sort of Boethian guide for Dante through the Circle of Mars. It is fitting that, while Boethius is celebrated as one of the great thinkers, his archetype in Cacciaguida is the ideal leader for Dante as he moves through the realm of the crusaders.

The image of Boethius is also found in the life of Dante the poet. We learn in *The Consolation of Philosophy* that Boethius is charged with bogus crimes and sentenced to exile and, eventually, death. Boethius had enjoyed a comfortable life in politics, but, by the time of the *Consolation*, much had changed. "But now, five hundred miles away, mute and defenseless, I am condemned to proscription and death because of my concern for the safety of the Senate," he tells Lady Philosophy (Boethius 13). Boethius makes it quite clear that he is completely innocent. He simply wanted to preserve the integrity of the Senate. In exchange for this, he is stripped of everything through his exile and forced to wait out his killing. Further, Boethius laments the loss of his reputation. Due to the charges brought against him, Boethius says that he "cannot bear to think of the rumors and various opinions that are now going around" (14). The entire experience is humiliating and terrifying for Boethius.

The similarity between Boethius' misfortunes and Dante's life is brought out quite nicely in Cacciaguida's prophecy of Dante's future. Cacciaguida tells Dante that, "as

Hippolytus was forced to flee from Athens / by his devious and merciless stepmother, / just so you too shall have to leave your Florence” (Dante 203, ls 46-48.) This comparison works perfectly in evoking the sense of injustice in the action of driving Dante out of his beloved city. Just as Hippolytus was driven out of Athens due to his stepmother’s false charges against him, so Dante will be driven out of Florence for absurd reasons. Like Boethius, Dante will abandon his cherished life in Florence. Indeed, Dante’s ancestor warns him that he will “be forced to leave behind those things / you love most dearly” (204, ls 55-56). Furthermore, the poet will go on to experience as much public humiliation as Boethius. Cacciaguida tells Dante that “the public will, as always, blame the party / that has been wronged” (204, ls. 52-53). The phrase, “as always,” seems to be a subtle reminder of the similar injustice suffered by Boethius. Seeing the connections in their lives, Dante must have felt some relief knowing that Boethius, one of his heroes, went through a similar ordeal.

Through the parallels Dante the poet weaves between himself and Boethius, the Circle of Mars becomes a sort of meditation on Fortune and wisdom. We can see the formation of this meditation within the first lines of the fifteenth canto. As the souls in Mars finish their song to God, Dante ponders how “right it is that he forever mourn / who out of love for what does not endure / loses that other love eternally” (178, ls. 10-12). “That other love” can be seen as love of God, while the love that causes mourning is love of Fortune. This dichotomy of loves can be traced back to Boethius’ definitions. As Lady Philosophy grills Boethius over his loss of Fortune, she tells him that “you are wrong if you think that Fortune has changed toward you. This is her nature, the way she always behaves. She is changeable, and so in her relations with you she has merely done what she always does” (Boethius 21). As Boethius points out, it is the very essence of Fortune to incessantly change. Anyone who devotes her life to it will inevitably be heartbroken because fortune, which “does not endure,” will abandon her. Boethius labels that which falls under the realm of Fortune as “limited things,” which “are

not man’s path to happiness, nor can they make him happy in themselves” (55).

One of the many forms of Fortune that Dante criticizes and extracts from Boethius is that of a noble name. In the beginning of the sixteenth canto, Dante the poet gives a sort of invective against the ignorance and vainglory of nobility. “Ah, trivial thing, our pride in noble blood!” he cries out in the very beginning of the canto (Dante 189, l.1). This is basically a summary of Boethius’ scorn of fame and nobility in Book Three of the *Consolation*. As Lady Philosophy discusses the lack of happiness in fame, she tells him that “everyone knows that to be called noble is a stupid and worthless thing... The praise of others (in this case, your parents) will not make you famous if you have no fame of your own” (Boethius 53). For Boethius, nobility is just another guise that Fortune uses to seduce us. It is something that carries no weight if an individual has done nothing virtuous to gain that nobility. Moreover, this kind of nobility is just as temporal as any other form of Fortune. Dante makes this quite clear when exclaims, “Nobility, a mantle quick to shrink! / Unless we add to it from day to day, / time with its shears will trim off more and more” (Dante 189, ls. 7-9). One must not revel in the actions of his ancestors, but virtuously add to the “mantle” if he wants to enjoy the title of nobility.

Dante the poet incorporates this lesson through his confession of his pride of Cacciaguida. When he is given the chance to talk to his ancestor, Dante “spoke again addressing him as ‘voi.’” (189, l. 10). Dante is so caught up in the honor which shrouds his ancestor that he begins to use showy language that reflects his overzealousness. As Dante’s guide, however, “Beatrice, not too far from us, / smiling, reminded me of her who coughed / to caution Guinevere at her first sign / of weakness” (189, ls. 13-15). As a sort of Lady Philosophy for Dante, Beatrice reminds the pilgrim of the foolishness of his pride with such subtle power that he stops using the “voi” altogether. In fact, the next time Dante speaks to Cacciaguida in the seventeenth canto, he speaks in more of an informal, intimate tone. In terms of Dante the poet, this intervention on the

part of Beatrice seems to represent the poet's discovery and change toward pride through the work of Boethius. In other words, since Dante's hostility toward noble pride is so similar to Boethius' claims, I see this as Dante's way of showing how important Boethius was in spiritually guiding the poet beyond the woes of Fortune, especially during his exile.

Another example that shows the decadence of Fortune is the representation of the decay of Florence. Dante uses his denouncement of noble pride as a foundation for the portrayal of his former home. Cacciaguida's account of the fallen families reflects this. He tells us that, if we consider the fall of several great ancient cities, "you should not find it hard to understand / or strange to hear that families dwindle out / when even cities pass away in time" (Dante 191, ls. 76-78). For Cacciaguida, the ephemeral nature of civilization is magnified in the fall of noble families. As Robert Hollander puts it, "If cities show such mortal tendencies, reflects Cacciaguida, how much more subject to mortality are mere families? (Hollander 446)" This harmonizes well with the subtle admonishment Beatrice has just given the pilgrim. The lesson of humility toward nobility given by Beatrice to Dante is expanded to the entire noble sphere of Florence in the rest of the canto. Just as Dante's pride in his ancestor reflects a reliance on Fortune, so the city's decay reflects its devotion to that which does not endure. "And as the turning of the lunar sphere / covers and then uncovers ceaselessly / the shore," Dante tells us, "so Fortune does with Florence now" (Dante 191, ls. 82-84). Like the circular process of the tides moving in and receding, the wheel of Fortune raises the city up only to drop it.

The point of this can be traced to Boethius. Dante is chronicling all of these Florentine noble families as fallen from their originally happy states. Like Lady Philosophy, Dante the poet seems to be reminding himself that everyone, at one point or another, is subject to the ways of Fortune. He seems to be going back to Boethius, who tells us that all of Philosophy's past followers have had to suffer. Furthermore, the decadence of Florence reflects the Boethian notion that those who are too taken

by their noble name, who are so enveloped in Fortune, suffer the greatest. At one point Cacciaguida exclaims, "How great I saw them once who now are ruined / by their own pride (192, ls. 109-110)!" Again, Dante the poet seems to be lamenting that the depravity of his city is an all-too-clear example of Boethius' claims.

There are also many indications of how the ideas of Boethius influence and intellectually develop Dante the pilgrim in the Circle of Mars. This is shown best in the seventeenth canto, where Cacciaguida discusses the relation between divine foreknowledge and human free will. The pilgrim, having traveled through Inferno and Purgatorio, wants Cacciaguida to tell him what his future entails. As the pilgrim points out, "you see, gazing upon the final Point / where time is timeless, those contingent things / before they ever come into true being" (203, ls. 16-18). God, the "final Point," does not see things according to a temporal sequence. Rather, God sees everything at the same time in an eternal present. Boethius makes the same claim when he argues that, "since God lives in the eternal present, His knowledge transcends all movement of time and abides in the simplicity of its immediate present" (Boethius 116). For God, all time is perceived at the same time. Since the members of Heaven continually gaze at God, they too can perceive everything in the eternal present.

This distinction, however, brings up a major philosophical problem that has plagued thinkers for a long time. If God can foresee all of our actions, then do we really have free will? The question becomes especially important in light of the poem, as the pilgrim's future actions seem to be preordained in the prophecy of Cacciaguida. As we have seen, however, Dante must choose to be virtuous if he wants to enjoy any sense of nobility or holiness. If it is predestined for Dante to act the way does, can he really be held accountable for the good or bad he does? If men cannot choose freely, then concepts of reward and punishment break down, since their chosen actions are mere illusions. Furthermore, Boethius points out that prayer would be meaningless, "for what is the point in

hope or prayer when everything that man desires is determined by unalterable process? (Boethius 107)” An ideal solution to this problem would allow for God to retain his foreknowledge and humans to keep their free will.

In the *Consolation*, Boethius gives such a solution. Lady Philosophy starts the argument by reinforcing the importance of human free will. In this way, Boethius the philosopher is able to literally build up from human nature to God’s nature. For Boethius, being a rational human being implies having free will, “for any being, which by its nature has the use of reason, must also have the power of judgment by which it can make decisions and, by its own resources, distinguish between things which should be desired and things which should be avoided” (103). We all have the power of judgment, and we know we can choose what is good or bad, so we must have free will.

If we do have free will, how is this reconciled with God’s foreknowledge? Boethius’ answer is crucial to understanding Dante’s seventeenth canto. The argument is preceded by the idea that “everything which is known is known not according to its own power but rather according to the capacity of the knower” (110). Before Boethius gives his argument for a compatibility between foreknowledge and free will, he emphasizes our severely limited epistemological capacities. From our perspective, we think that, if our future actions are known with certainty, they are wholly necessary. Our knowledge of the world is bound by the process of time and causality. God’s knowledge, on the other hand, is not bound by anything, since He exists beyond space and time.

Boethius’ solution to the problem is based on the fact that God exists in an eternal present. For Boethius, God’s knowledge “encompasses the infinite sweep of past and future, and regards all things in its simple comprehension as if they were now taking place” (116). Since God is outside of space and time, He perceives everything beyond the bounds that confine human perception. Boethius makes the interesting claim that God doesn’t actually foresee anything, since there is

no sense of temporal procession in His perceptions. Instead, God distinguishes things by His knowledge of the eternal present in which He exists. Since God doesn’t have foreknowledge in the way we think of it, His providence “does not change the nature and properties of things; it simply sees things present before it as they will later turn out to be in what we regard as the future” (117). Moreover, God is able to perceive all possible actions with the necessary actions. This includes actions which may never even occur. Therefore, God is able to see what can come about through both necessity and human free will without interfering in the contingency required for free will.

Cacciaguida seems to notice that, if Dante cannot be held accountable for his actions, the divine command to write the *Commedia* is meaningless. This is why he provides the Boethian argument for a compatibility between divine foreknowledge and human free will before he grants Dante’s request to hear his future. He starts his speech by saying that “contingency, which in no way extends / beyond the pages of your world of matter, / is all depicted in the eternal sight” (Dante 203, ls. 37-39). Like Boethius, Cacciaguida claims that God can see all potential actions, even the ones that never come into being. This ties in with what the pilgrim says earlier in the canto concerning those who look “upon the final Point” and see everything before it has come into being. Just as we can process certain mathematical laws, so Cacciaguida can see in the eternal present everything that will happen in the future.

Like Boethius, Dante wants to show that the eternal sight of these contingencies does not impose necessity on them. As Cacciaguida puts it, “this no more confers necessity / than does the movement of a boat downstream / depend upon the eyes that mirror it” (203, ls. 40-42). Just as a man who watches a moving boat doesn’t control its course, so God watches our actions without interfering with our free will. Dante’s analogy is similar to the questions Philosophy poses against Boethius’ claims. After showing him that God perceives in an eternal present, Lady Philosophy asks, “Why

then do you imagine that things are necessary which are illuminated by this divine light, since even men do not impose necessity on the things they see? Does your vision impose any necessity upon things which you see present before you? (Boethius 117)” Boethius is emphasizing the logical inconsistency in the notion that God foresees and therefore imposes necessity on all actions. Since He is in a state where there is no past or future, and perceives all necessarily occurring actions along with those that may or may not happen, God does not hinder human free will through His perception. Dante the poet’s analogy allows both his readers and the pilgrim to easily conceptualize the complicated solution offered by Boethius.

While Cacciaguida’s introduction preserves a sense of freedom in Dante’s actions in the prophecy, it also seems to be an intellectual preparation for the pilgrim. Indeed, the account of Dante’s future life is quite devastating. By giving the Boethian solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge before the bittersweet prophecy, Cacciaguida shows the pilgrim that God won’t unjustly heap misfortune on Dante. In a way, the poet seems to associate contingency, which doesn’t go beyond “the pages of your world of matter,” with Fortune, which “does not endure.” As we’ve seen, Dante the poet and Boethius discourage a dependence on the ways of Fortune, since it never makes men entirely happy. In this subtle way, then, Cacciaguida precedes his lengthy speech with the ideas of Boethius to assure the pilgrim that any calamity that follows in the prophecy is yet another instance of the turning of the wheel of Fortune.

Boethius not only serves as a consolation for the pilgrim and the poet, but also as a connector of the two perspectives. At one point in the *Consolation*, Lady Philosophy tells Boethius that “everything is governed by its own proper order directing all things toward the good” (93). Nothing describes the overarching Boethian solace in the *Paradiso* better than this. Although there are discords in Dante’s life, Boethius assures him as both a poet and pilgrim that it is all for the good. For Dante the pilgrim, a break from the prosperity of life in Florence seems detrimental, but it will actually help the

poet to direct his passions toward God and writing the *Commedia*. The pilgrim can come to terms with his prophecy by acknowledging the temporality of the dissonance in his coming life. As Hollander put it, “no matter how discordant the sounds of his great-great-grandson’s coming travails may seem, Cacciaguida would seem to be insisting, they will eventually be heard as harmony, at least once Dante’s task is completed” (Hollander 470). Looking at the poem through a Boethian lens reveals how the perspectives of the poet and pilgrim dissolve into a singular progression toward the good.

The references to Boethius in the Circle of Mars are myriad. He becomes a source of intellectual aid for Dante the poet and pilgrim. From the biographical connections between Dante and Boethius evolves a meditation on the inevitability of misfortune. Indeed, Dante’s pride in his nobility is amplified by his beloved city’s devotion to that “which does not endure.” Boethius, however, reminds us of the goodness in transcending the ups and downs of the wheel and directing one’s passion toward the good. Through Cacciaguida’s elegant review of Boethius solution to the problem between divine foreknowledge and human free will, the pilgrim is guaranteed his free will and given a subtle encouragement to endure through the hardships that will end beyond the world of matter. Taken together, we can see how Dante ingeniously joins the perspectives of the poet and pilgrim through the Boethian claim that all is done for the good. By the end of this thought-provoking Circle, the ideas of Boethius not only console Dante, but also encourage the reader to look beyond the ever-spinning wheel of Fortune.

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