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Boethius' Consolation and the Tyranny of Philosophy

Joel C. Relihan

Wheaton College, Norton, Massachusetts

Workshop: Philosophical Echoes from the Prison Cell:

From Socrates and Boethius to Antonio Gramsci and Toni Negri

Marianna Papastephanou, Chair

When Marianna Papastephanou first graciously invited me to participate in this workshop, I was not certain that I had much to contribute to what I was

certain would be a lively discussion. I had not much discussed prison literature as a cross-cultural phenomenon in my book *The Prisoner's Philosophy: Life and Death in Boethius' Consolation*.¹ My concerns with the text were primarily literary and generic: What are the implications of expressing philosophical ideas in a neatly patterned prosimetric form as a Menippean satire, a genre that typically abuses the theorist who believes that his theories are sufficient to explain either human nature or the universe that contains it? But there is latent in the title of my book an idea that I never explored explicitly in print. By reference to the famous logical problem of The Prisoner's Dilemma, I encouraged the contemplation of this question: What is the prisoner's best strategy for gaining his freedom? I would say that when the jailer gives you a choice, and it is a nasty choice, one that makes you work against your best interests by appealing to your worst instincts, why should you believe that the jailer is a man, or a woman, of his or her word? Why should you expect that the bargain would be kept? Why cooperate at all? Resistance, not acquiescence, may prove to be the more honorable path for any prisoner faced with merely logical choices.

There are many adulatory uses of and references to *Consolation* in modern literature that suggest that what we value in the book is not its

¹ Notre Dame 2007. My translation of *Consolation* is used throughout (Hackett; Indianapolis 2001).

philosophy (which is quaint and outmoded) but rather the courage of the philosopher who finds transcendence and comfort in an intellectual rejection of the injustices done to him by the tyrant Theoderic. But my argument today is that the real tyrant that the prisoner in *Consolation* resists is Philosophy herself; that it is Philosophy that would rob the prisoner of his voice; that *Consolation* celebrates the moral act of continuing to speak, and of continuing to write, in defiance of Philosophy, when Philosophy wants him to be silent and accept his death for her sake.

A BIT OF HISTORY

Theoderic had the author imprisoned on a charge of treason in 524 and then executed. Two points: first, it is not absolutely certain that *Consolation* was written in prison; second, and more important, Theoderic goes unnamed, even in the prisoner's long and bitter account of his political activities in Book 1, Section 4, in which he says he tried to live up to the Platonic ideal of a philosopher-statesman. In *Consolation*, it was the defense of the Senate that got him in trouble, a Senate that did nothing to come to his rescue. He addresses the absent Senate venomously (1.4.36): "Would that no one could be convicted of such a crime ever again, Senators—you have

earned it!” As for the historical charge of treason, we ought to admit that that could have been true. To quote James O’Donnell: “[D]id no one . . . dream of Boethius *augustus*?”²

Philosophy’s reaction to the prisoner’s outburst at 1.4 is severe, unsympathetic, dismissive. The prisoner is to blame for his exile; only he could have do this to himself (1.5.2-3): “She said: When I saw you grief-stricken and in tears I knew on the spot that you were a man to be pitied, an exile; but I would have had no idea just how far away your place of exile was had your set speech not given it away. **3.** How great the distance is! Yet you have not been driven out of your fatherland; no, you have wandered away on your own or, if you prefer to think of yourself as driven out, it is rather you yourself who have done the driving—for such a power over you could never have been granted to anyone else.”

This is on the surface of the text, but it is worth stressing: Philosophy takes it upon herself to argue the prisoner out of his upset with the political maneuverings that have condemned him. She frequently speaks in her poems of the miseries of tyrants, the fears of tyrants, the contemptibility of tyrants; but never of the specific tyrant who imprisoned the prisoner. Somewhat less

² Relihan, *Prisoner’s Philosophy*, p. 40, n. 28, from O’Donnell’s 1993 *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* of John Moorhead, *Theoderic in Italy* (Oxford 1992): “[D]id no one then dream of Boethius *augustus*? If not Boethius, who? If Symmachus, then Boethius as son-in-law and heir is scarcely less important. It is ironic that in our great reverence for the cloistered intellectual, we may have blinded ourselves to his true role in history.”

obvious is that Philosophy calls upon the prisoner to escape from his prison cell by flying away with her to his true homeland, but the prisoner refuses to follow her. Just as Philosophy trivializes the real tyrant by universalizing tyranny, she trivializes the prison experience by imagining escape as something other than escape—she is speaking of death.

It may not be true that the historical Boethius comes at the true end of the classical era, but it is true that Boethius the author depicts himself within the pages of *Consolation* as the last Roman poet, the last Roman patriot, the last true philosopher. He wants us to see him as the summation of many histories. So consider this arc that connects the beginning and end of antiquity: Achilles in his tent in Book 9 of the *Iliad*, Socrates in prison in *Phaedo* and *Crito*, and Boethius in prison in *Consolation*. In each, the isolated hero receives a guest or guests that urge escape; in each, the hero refuses to move; in each, the act of refusal is cast as obedience to inner principles and the rejection of what is expected. What is truly remarkable about *Consolation* is that the author has cast Philosophy herself (that is, upper-case, abstract Philosophy) as the force that must be rejected. And it is easy to overlook the fact that *Consolation* is about a book being written by one of the members of the dialogue. Achilles and Socrates are not authors

but Boethius is, and it is the creation of the book itself that is the historical author's assertion of his freedom.

And so I return after many years to Ioan Davies' *Writers in Prison* and his thoughts on Boethius.³ He does have a sense of the value of Menippean satire, and it is probably in appreciation of this that the book is "Dedicated to Mikhail Bakhtin's cigarette papers." Davies is quite illuminating when he says that *Consolation* is fundamentally about justification, not philosophy. Boethius "did not *expect* to be imprisoned, but, once he has been, his entire previous history must be rewritten to accommodate the fact, so that we are convinced that the previous history was a progression to this glorious moment" (46-47, emphasis in the original).

At the end of *Consolation*, the prisoner, who had fallen silent after his objections in the fourth prose section of the final book and the poem that follows it, is finally invited by Philosophy not to travel to the realms above as she had wanted at first, not to view from a height the lives of others (and so discover that tyrants are the true exiles), but to view his own life through the eyes of God, so as to see that even the injustice of his imprisonment is part of the divine gaze. Davies does not see this as a matter of plot, but he

³ Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.

does see the more general issues at stake. “Prison writing is about guilt, but about the ultimate guilt of not knowing whether one’s actions were locked into a world over which one had no control or into one’s self (which comes to the same thing). Prisoners . . . write to make sense to themselves and others of that predicament” (235). Boethius the author therefore presents the drama of the unjustly imprisoned statesman staying in the phenomenal world, in the world of experience, and learning its ultimate value. It is better to insist on the providential nature of one’s punishment than to be a wounded innocent.

And crucial to this drama is the fact that it is written down, that it has become a book. Philosophy never asked the prisoner to write; in fact, she enters the prison cell and practically has as her first act the banishment of the poetic Muses whose dictation the prisoner had been taking. She breaks off the act of writing at the beginning of *Consolation*; it can only be an author who has survived the confrontation with Philosophy, who has elected to stay in the world, who goes on to write *Consolation*. It is a subtle effect: when the author dramatizes a struggle between his imprisoned self and the Muse who created his earlier works (and Philosophy is certainly the Muse of philosophy and philosophers), he both destabilizes the writing process and makes his authorship an act of defiance. This too is congruent with a

conclusion drawn by Davies, but reached by another route: “[P]rison writing is self-reflexive. It is about trying to establish authorship (collective or individual) when that has been denied by the operation of the law. For most prison writing there is no evident author. . . . Prison writing, from Boethius to Sarrazine, confronts the writing machine that commands, appropriates, spews out” (236). Philosophy tries throughout *Consolation* to control the content of the conversation and to redirect the prisoner and his thoughts, but it is the prisoner who fashions the end result.

Now it is notoriously difficult to keep distinct the three agents of *Consolation*: the prisoner, Philosophy, and the author who presents a confrontation between the two. The difficulty is heightened not only because Boethius the author invites us to identify him with Boethius the prisoner, but also because Philosophy presents herself as what the prisoner has always known. Her attempt to reeducate the prisoner is an attempt to make the prisoner more his true self by making him more like her, as if the goal of the book would then be the melding of prisoner, Muse, and author. But Davies often confuses this end goal—this unachieved goal, I might add—with the action that would lead up to it. The problem is this: Davies takes as the author’s essential orientation what is only the character Philosophy’s denial of the world. “[Boethius’] weakness, of course,” Davies says, “is the

weakness of refusing to confront the real and the self-evident, the rejection of desire which is surely the basis of our experience in the everyday prison that all of us encounter” (43). My point is that while Philosophy may deny the real, the prisoner does not, and the *Consolation* and Boethius the author do not.

The struggle for control of a work is a Menippean motif; and it is good now to lay out the other Menippean substrates of *Consolation*. There are three foundations for my reading of *Consolation*—the elements that led me originally to view it as a Menippean satire and that then led me to see the evolution and Christianization of the genre. The first is that when Philosophy appears to the prisoner, she comes from the Land of the Dead; she is a disrespected genre looking for a champion (this motif goes back to Old Comedy) and she is distressed to see that the prisoner is in no condition to be her champion; her goal is to re-educate him so as to prove her own value; she wants him to die because death proves the philosopher. The stronger remedies and the promised honey-rimmed bitter cup that Philosophy offers can only be Socrates’ cup of hemlock. The second is that when Philosophy wants the prisoner to fly out of the prison with her, her stated aim at the beginnings of Books 4 and 5, he refuses; he asks harder and harder questions, thus keeping her grounded, and keeping himself alive. He

resists the voyage to the other world. The third is that when the prisoner corners Philosophy on the question of free will and divine foreknowledge and gets her to admit that only a theologian can unravel that knot, he gets more than he bargained for. *Consolation* reveals the limits of Philosophy's knowledge, the path that she cannot take, the truth that lies beyond her grasp, but the prisoner has traded the promised view from heaven, from which he would see that tyrants are the true exiles, for a consideration of God's view from a height of *him*, the prisoner, whose unjust imprisonment is now part of God's providential gaze.

Parody of philosophical, particularly Platonic, modes of discourse (dialogue, myth) is also Menippean, and this is at the heart of *Consolation*. It is easy to say that *Phaedo* is one of the pervasive influences in *Consolation*. Boethius, knowing that he is about to die, draws inspiration from the traditions concerning Socrates.⁴ But it is *Crito* that offers parallels in action and in content.

I will not summarize the action of *Crito* before this audience. Socrates imagines the laws and constitution of Athens appearing to him in his cell as he prepares to run away, and convincing him that flight would be

⁴ But *Phaedo* certainly presents no parallel for the material of *Consolation*, even if in it we read of Socrates composing hymns in prison (*Phaedo* 60c-61b). *Phaedo* offers reasons why the soul must be immortal, and this is a question which never really arises in *Consolation*.

hypocritical and a rejection of the principles by which he had always lived. True to his habit, Socrates imagines an other-worldly voice that only dissuades him from a possible course of action. And the crucial parallel is this: the philosopher stays in prison, accepting the decision of his city. The true philosopher is proved by his unwillingness to escape the consequences of his actions.

But Philosophy in *Consolation* does present the picture of life outside of the prison; or rather she hints at it, when, at the beginnings of Books 4 and 5 she refers to the wings that she will attach to the narrator's mind that will enable him to rise up and see his true home. She wants the narrator to escape. Boethius's prisoner, like Socrates in *Crito*, will stay in his cell. But Socrates does so in obedience to his revelation, in order to die; Boethius's prisoner does so in spite of his guide's intentions, in order to live.

Consolation is a parody, or, if you will, a travesty of *Crito*: the prisoner in effect refuses to drink the hemlock. And it is by this refusal that he shows himself to be a philosopher.

THE PRISON-HOUSE OF POETRY

I recently presented a reading of *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy* that posed this question: What if, instead of viewing the poetry of *Consolation* as discardable ornaments, as many readers and anthologizers are apt to do, we view the poetry as central, and the prose as commentary upon it?⁵ Consider this remarkable statement from Seth Lerer's introduction to the new Harvard Boethius (2008) by David Slavitt:

“The reader coming to the *Consolation* for the first time—especially in David Slavitt's uniquely evocative translation—should not be daunted by doctrinal debates or by the details of late antique history that shaped its making. Instead, the reader should savor the resonances of its verse: from the ruefulness of its opening meters in Book I, through the power of its natural descriptions in Book II, the purview of its cosmology in Book III, the affecting retellings of the tales of mythic heroes in Books III and IV, to the knowing serenity in Book V. . . . *The reader should attend as well to the prose dialogue that frames the poems*” (xv; emphasis added).

But what I want to stress in this workshop is that this seriously misreads the poetry of *Consolation*. This speaks of a pattern of constant moral uplift, but the poetry is not unified, and it can only be read as uplifting to readers if the readers substitute themselves for a prisoner who is being elbowed aside. All

⁵ “The *Consolation* as Anthology with Commentary,” *The Classics Renewed*, Brown University, October 2011.

but four poems come from the mouth of Philosophy herself, but when the prisoner speaks in verse he has other agenda.⁶

In that paper I reached the conclusion that Philosophy, in functioning as a poet, was consistently engaged in the act of taking the prisoner's personal experience and universalizing it, stripping it of its particularities, and that the prisoner was trying to reclaim, and to hold onto, that experience. Philosophy's New Muses are engaged not so much in making a unity of emotion and discursive thought, but in translating the prisoner's bitter personal experiences into generic complaints that can be easily disposed of.⁷

But there are further limitations to what poetry can accomplish in *Consolation*, and the reader of *Consolation* as prison literature needs to realize that the author, even as he chooses to write, chooses to reveal what it

⁶ Many medievalists now see in the debate between Philosophy and the prisoner in *Consolation* the model for similar confrontations with such authority figures as Nature in Alan of Lille, Beatrice in Dante, Reason in *Romance of the Rose*, Church in *Piers Plowman*, confrontations in which the limits of the wisdom of the wisdom figure are stressed. The more that *Consolation* is seen as exploring the limits of Philosophy's wisdom, the more that poetry becomes, not an element of Philosophy's persuasiveness, but of her boundaries.

⁷ Davies takes "translation" as the primary concern of prison writing, meaning the creation by the prisoner of new forms of discourse and communication when others had been denied. Davies' chapter "The Consolations of Philosophy" comes close to making the point that there are at work in *Consolation* two *competing* forces: one directed outward, to the preservation of what the prisoner knows; one inward, toward a revelation of "the hidden self and ultimately the hidden god" (40). The outward self that is preserved is Boethius the philosophical commentator, the man who in Book 5 is quoting from his own work on Aristotle's *On Interpretation*; the hidden self is the one who discovers through his impasse with Philosophy herself that the value of his life lies in God's contemplation of it; see *The Prisoner's Philosophy*, p. 11, n. 34.

is that he cannot write. Some technical details are in order. There are 39 poems in the five books of *Consolation*: 7 + 8 + 12 + 7 + 5. The first book begins with a poem and ends with one, while all the other books begin with prose. Every book ends with a poem, meaning that *Consolation* overall falls into a rhythm of prose-before-verse; every book, that is, except for the last book, where the absence of a final poem has always been a bit of a shock.⁸ There is then a curious symmetry between the first book and the last: the first has one poem too many, the last one too few (6+1, 8, 12, 7, 6-1). In fact, Book 1 begins with a poem that shouldn't be there (it is dictated by the pagan Muses whom Philosophy dismisses and therefore constitutes a dismal false start) and Book 5, if you will allow me, ends with a poem that isn't there; the lack of the final poem, so clearly expected by the rhythm of the whole work, indicates a pointed failure to achieve the reconciliation of prisoner and Philosophy. These bookends of *Consolation* are themselves statements about the proprieties and limitations of poetry: what *is* said in verse lies between what shouldn't have been said and what cannot be said. I find this to be a valuable formulation.

⁸ This is sometimes mistakenly seen as a sign of the physical incompleteness of the book, and we should certainly shy away from the romantic-slash-dramatic notion of Boethius interrupted in his work by the executioner's knock on the door.

The prisoner speaks in verse only when there is a disturbance of the pattern of the verse, in Books 1 and 5. But there is still a patterning that binds all the poems together, by topic and by meter, so that the reader who has a chance to stand back from the individual poems and view the creation as a whole—I consciously echo here the language of the end of Book 5, in which Philosophy encourages the prisoner to look at the whole earth from God’s point of view—can see that the prisoner’s disturbance of the order is part of the order of the book.

It is therefore necessary to make some readjustments in our view of what it is that poetry does in *Consolation*. It is not the case that *Consolation* simply “is in prose and verse”; rather, the prisoner is more comfortable in the prose medium, and it is Philosophy who is showing off her range of poetic meters. Further, the prose is what documents the prisoner’s attempt to assert the value of all his personal experience; the verse is Philosophy’s constant attempt to take the personal and make it abstract. The prisoner is primarily a prose man; poetry therefore does not represent a union of intellectual and emotional approaches to Wisdom, but is Philosophy’s medium for denying to the prisoner the particularities of his experience.⁹

⁹ In other words, verse and prose only *seem* to be in parallel in *Consolation* as a whole; when we take it apart and put it back together again we see that the verse is a mechanism

I would draw these conclusions:

- a) poetry is a medium that belongs primarily to Philosophy;
- b) poetry is a medium that suppresses the prisoner;
- c) poetry is not the emotional medium that stands in contrast to the rationality of prose and to discursive thought, but an abstract medium that stands in distinction to the physical circumstance of the prisoner;¹⁰
- d) the poetry attempts to have meaning without reference to speakers; it tries to be universal; that is, it tries to find truths beyond the specific physical circumstances of the prisoner.

The interruptions in the smooth flow of Philosophy's argumentation come when the prisoner speaks in verse, and it is clear that the prisoner has trouble speaking in verse. He can't find a way, in verse, either to let go of his earthly concerns or to express them. Neither the prisoner nor the author can in verse express his *consent* to the system that Philosophy tries to impose. Therefore, just as *Consolation* lacks a dedication, it lacks a conclusion. This documents

by which Philosophy takes the argument away from the particularities of the prisoner to an abstraction.

¹⁰ One could say that what Philosophy's poetry does best is to present the epic vision of the totality of the God-centered universe (3 m.9.27-28): "You are serenity, peace for the holy; their goal is to see you: You are their source, their conveyance, their leader, their path, and their haven."

an impasse. As a personal dialogue, an internal dialogue, it doesn't really want to go out into the wide world signed, sealed, and delivered.

And so we return to the beginning. *Consolation* documents the prisoner's struggle to write a book. Philosophy herself did not encourage writing but offered the acceptance of silence, death, and the path of transcendence. The prisoner's gambit is to keep Philosophy talking, to ground her, to keep her on earth. The philosopher who was scolded by Philosophy for his lament at his failure at being a philosopher-statesman here tries to keep Philosophy where she can do the most good, in the land of the living. This is the only moral act available to the prisoner. Socrates is said to have brought Philosophy down from heaven; Boethius through this drama does the same thing.

So why write poetry at all? What is the purpose of a prosimetric text whose verses represent a straitjacket on the thought? Menippean satire is at home in two worlds, and the one that the author's heart is *not* in is the one that is described. He is forcing poetry to perform one task when there is a second task glimpsed but not dwelt on, not truly committed to paper.

Philosophy, as the summation and encapsulation of both philosophic and poetic traditions, tries to impose form. But the very Menippean tradition of the mixture of prose and verse, which insists that it is fundamentally

incoherent to write in two media at once, examines, puts to the test, Philosophy's claim to the total understanding of human life and thought. Boethius the author has offered his own experience not as the *subject* of poetry but as the *objection* to poetry. Philosophy cannot understand or accommodate *him*: poetry can't either.

I would offer this, then, as a summation of all this. Boethius the author struggles to understand where his life fits into the scheme of things, now that his imprisonment has turned things upside down. Philosophy believes that the prisoner is superior to the world, but the prisoner would rather live and say that he is of the world, even if that world seems to be unjust. He cannot put himself in the position of looking down from heaven, as if he understood the world; he takes rather the vertiginous delight in understanding that he is not the subject of Philosophy's lesson but the object of God's gaze. Freedom comes in rejecting Philosophy's more simple-minded formulations for the transcendence of the divine vision, and in that you may see at work in the end of *Consolation* not *Crito* but *Job*.

Thank you.