

# Evil and the Parable of the World in the *Consolation of Philosophy*

William Wians

Since that first morning when I crawled  
into the world, a naked grubby thing,  
and found the world unkind,  
my dearest faith has been that this  
is but a trial: I shall be changed.

Stanley Kunitz, from *Hornworm: Autumn Lamentation*

According to a somewhat deflationary definition in the *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, a parable is a “picturesque figure of language in which an analogy refers to a similar but different reality.”<sup>1</sup> Put differently, a parable is a story the meaning of which resides in a reality outside the story itself. Some parables virtually demand further explication by their paradoxical character. Others present a surface seemingly free of irony or hidden depths. Upon encountering the latter, one may be unaware that he or she is confronted by a parable at all.

Is the world itself a parable? Our usual attitude toward the world assumes that the significance of events around us can in principle be understood by reference to forces and causes—historical, economic, psychological—that reside and operate wholly within the world we inhabit (even if it proves impossible to trace out precise causal connections in practice). But the most profound parable suggests that the world itself is a parable, that its meaning can be discerned only from an extraordinary perspective located outside the world, not within it. If so, the world would be written in

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D Coogans, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 567.

characters that must be interpreted, but which first must be seen as characters if the need for interpretation is to be recognized.

The art and literature of the West have devoted sustained attention to what I shall call the parable of the world. Probably the best known parables are those of Jesus, which consistently require that the listener seek a meaning of events lying outside the events of the story (including that of his own presence). But an unseen reality that lies hidden behind the ordinary but gives it its ultimate meaning can be detected four centuries earlier in the ideas of ancient Greek philosophers, including the cosmic strife celebrated in the enigmatic aphorisms of Heraclitus, the unity beyond the changing world of appearances proclaimed in the austere poem of Parmenides, and the form of Beauty Itself glimpsed at the summit of the ascent passage in Plato's *Symposium*. Augustine (354-430) provides a powerful anticipation and likely influence on Boethius when he writes in *Confessions* 10.vi.9 that the Earth, the sea, and the heavens tell him to "Look beyond us" (though it is their beauty and not evil that is meant to turn the soul upward). In art, one could name the *Transfiguration* of Raphael and El Greco's *Annunciation* finished in 1600, both of which visually depict two planes of reality, a transcendent above that of uncomprehending humans. Such parables are decisively and explicitly rejected by Friedrich Nietzsche in his *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, who calls for a parable of becoming instead.<sup>2</sup> Here I shall explore the parable of the world as the shaping idea behind the *Consolation of Philosophy*, the moving meditation on evil and suffering by the Roman Christian neo-Platonist Boethius (AD 475-ca. 525).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The present paper is part of a larger project that explores how the theme of the world as parable forms a fundamental and contested part of the Western outlook.

<sup>3</sup> My description begs a much-debated question: just what sort of Christian was Boethius, if a Christian at all? I shall not pursue the question here, as its answer does not affect my characterization of the *Consolation* as a parable.

The philosophical problem motivating the *Consolation* is the problem of evil.<sup>4</sup> Condemned to death, the imprisoned Boethius wonders that the god who controls the heavens should allow the innocent of this world to suffer from the chance blows of fortune and the evil intentions of the wicked. The problem is stated early in Book I, midway through Boethius' "long and noisy" complaint at the injustice of his being condemned for actions in defense of the Roman Senate:

Grief has not so dulled my wits in all this as to make me complain that the wicked have piled up their crimes against virtue; but what does fill me with wonder (*admiror*) is that they have brought their hopes to fruition. It may be part of human weakness (*deteriora*) to have evil wishes, but it is nothing short of monstrous that God should look on while every criminal is allowed to achieve his purpose against the innocent. If this is so, it was hardly without reason that one of your household asked where evil (*mala*) comes from if there is a god, and where good (*bona*) comes from if there isn't. (I.4.98-106)<sup>5</sup>

Boethius' initial statement of the problem of evil reveals a striking characteristic of the work as a whole: the author's ability to reveal a universal dimension of his particular situation.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the *Consolation*, elements of the narrative often function at two quite distinct levels, the personal and the philosophical—or as I shall say, the parabolic. In the present case, the problem of evil first arises in

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<sup>4</sup> Many other philosophical problems are addressed in the work—the metaphysics of the soul and a defense of free will, to name but two—but these are introduced in response to the central problem.

<sup>5</sup> All translations are from the revised V. E. Watts, trans., *Boethius: The Consolation of Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 1999). Line numbers are from S. J. Tester, trans., *Boethius: The Theological Tractates and the Consolation of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), Loeb edition.

<sup>6</sup> “. . . the *Consolation*, the masterpiece, springing perhaps more clearly than any other work of antiquity directly out of the circumstances of its composition”; Anna Crabbe, “Literary Design in the *De Consolatione Philosophiae*” in Margaret Gibson, ed., *Boethius: His Life, Thought, and Influence* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), 237. Curley speaks of the work's “essential harmony between the microcosm and the macrocosm.” See T. F. Curley, “How to Read the *Consolation of Philosophy*,” *Interpretation* 14 (1986): 211.

all its generality out of a detailed history of Senate intrigue. Already Boethius is conditioning the reader to discern a significance in events that goes beyond what appears at the surface.

As is well known, Boethius solves the problem by arguing that evil, as the opposite of the supreme Good, is literally nothing (III.12.80-82). This solution has struck many readers as unsatisfying, for the reality of evil feels too tangible to be brushed aside so easily. But, there is more to Boethius' response than a clever neo-Platonic doctrine.<sup>7</sup> Boethius' solution relies on a profound expression of the parable of the world. The *Consolation* provides nothing less than a glimpse of a godlike perspective from which the entire cosmos—and crucially, humanity's place within it—can be viewed and a new understanding of evil can be gained. At its surface, the world appears random and unjust, ruled by the whore Fortune and evil men who do as they please without fear of constraint or punishment. But once these are seen from a higher perspective, the significance of worldly events is transformed. The evil we suffer is not random. Rather, it is meant to make us despise the world and seek to flee from it.

To see that Boethius' solution depends on grasping the parable of the world, we shall work through the progression of ideas and images in key sections of Books III and IV, paying attention to both the prose and the poetry.<sup>8</sup> The progression begins at the start of Book III.<sup>9</sup> Over the course of this book, Philosophy works to turn

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<sup>7</sup> For the sources of Boethius' neo-Platonism, see P. Courcelle, *Late Latin Writers and their Greek Sources*, translated by H. E. Wedeck (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969).

<sup>8</sup> On Boethius' conception of philosophy as a therapy requiring both prose and poetry, see Curley, "How to Read the *Consolation of Philosophy*," 243-62. For convenient summaries of the *Consolation's* use of prose and poetry, see Crabbe, "Literary Design in the *De Consolatione Philosophiae*," 238-41; S. Varvis, *The Consolation of Boethius* (San Francisco: Mellen Press, 1987), 4-5; G. O'Daly, *The Poetry of Boethius* (London: Duckworth, 1991), 14-29.

<sup>9</sup> One could say that the progression begins in the closing metrum of Book II (II.

the gaze of the prisoner away from this world. This phase ends with the paradoxical assertion that evil is nothing. In Book IV, Philosophy encourages the prisoner to look back with a new awareness on the degenerate world left behind. This phase ends with an intimation of a plan beyond any ordinary human knowing.<sup>10</sup> At the juncture of the two phases and containing the key to the whole progression, is the episode of Orpheus. This story shows that the progress of the prisoner is put in jeopardy precisely by his failure to grasp that there is a higher significance behind the events of this world. Thus, redirecting the gaze of the prisoner involves more than just a turning of the soul toward the truth. It depends on convincing the prisoner that the world he seeks to understand is a parable in the first place.<sup>11</sup>

If the *Consolation* as a whole charts a “linear development from the physical to the metaphysical,”<sup>12</sup> Book III contains the dramatic turning point. This is signaled at its very start. Whereas in Book I the prisoner had sat with head bent down, silently looking into the dust, and in II had begun to look intently, but silently, at Lady Philosophy waiting to hear more, in III the prisoner takes the initiative, asking her to continue from where she left off at the end of II. Praising her as the greatest comfort for afflicted souls, Boethius proclaims himself ready for the stronger medicines she had warned of earlier. Philosophy’s reply already hints at a new perspective:

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m7), which surprises the reader by substituting Love for Fortune as the ruler of the material world.

<sup>10</sup> Though one theme I shall address, that of the limits of human knowledge, extends into the final section of Book V, the solution to the problem of evil is complete by the end of Book IV.

<sup>11</sup> See also: S. Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 166-68; Ann W. Astell, *Job, Boethius, and Epic Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 42-43. Both Lerer and Astell point out that the prisoner is initially blind to any analogy between himself and the epic heroes who form the subjects of the crucial metra to follow.

<sup>12</sup> Crabbe, “Literary Design,” 257.

though they are strong, she assures Boethius that he will see them as sweet once he knows the destination she intends (III.1.13-17). This is nothing other than true happiness (*ad veram felicitatem*, III.1.17-18); but to see it Boethius must redirect his gaze away from the shadows of happiness—wealth, position, power, fame, and pleasure—that now obscure his vision. This is a perspective the prisoner does not yet share. In the sections that follow, Lady Philosophy must in effect descend from her proper dwelling place to the limited perspective of her suffering patient in order to lead him upward.<sup>13</sup>

After examining each of the five false candidates for happiness in III.3-7, Philosophy in section III.8 begins to turn Boethius' gaze in a new direction. What is necessary is simply stated. Lady Philosophy tells Boethius to look up:

Look up (*respicite*) at the vault of heaven: see the strength of its foundation and the speed of its movement, and stop admiring (*mirari*) things that are worthless. Yet the heavens are less wonderful (*mirandum*) for their foundation and speed than for the order that rules them. (III.8.17-19)

In her first metrum of the *Consolation*, Lady Philosophy had described the prisoner as an “astronomer once used in joy/ to comprehend and to commune/ with planets on their wandering ways.” Now she hints at something higher. Astronomy studies objects that are eternal but visible. Exalted as they are, they are not supreme, for they are not their own cause. Thus, even as Philosophy directs the prisoner away from the sublunary to the superlunary, she points toward a superior order that guides even the stars.

Metrum III.8 reinforces the lesson. Humans are led by nothing more than blind ignorance to stray from the path of true

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<sup>13</sup> This, I believe, is the meaning of the opening lines of III.2: “She stood gazing at the ground for a while, as if she had retreated into the recesses of thought.” See also Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue*, 127-29.

happiness. They seek on earth a happiness that is higher than the sky. Its conclusion foreshadows one part of the parabolic meaning of the problem of evil—foolish men may be led by their failures to see the nature of true happiness:

Alas, what wretched ignorance leads  
Mankind from the path astray!

....  
But in their blindness they do not know  
Where lies the good they seek:  
That which is higher than the sky  
On earth below they seek.

What can I wish you foolish men?  
Wealth and fame pursue,  
And when great toil wins false reward,  
Then may you see the true! (III.m8.1-2, 15-22)

Philosophy wishes (*imprecer*) that failed human aspirations will lead to a redirected vision. Though stated only in terms of frustrated worldly ambitions, the conclusion expresses the idea that our suffering provides the key to a more comprehensive vision.

Section III.9 is the apex of Boethius' ascent. Now that Boethius can see clearly the picture of false happiness, Philosophy endeavors to show him the form of true happiness. After showing him that the five false candidates converge as five names for what is one in substance, Philosophy urges the prisoner to turn away from the physical altogether and to see the truth with a vision that depends on no physical organ: "Now turn your mind's eye in the opposite direction and you will immediately see the true happiness that I promised" (III.9.74-77). Boethius answers that even a blind man can see what she has revealed (III.9.78). He has learned that true happiness is something utterly apart from physical things. From this vantage point, he recognizes for the first time in the *Consolation* that the world we inhabit is constituted of "mortal and degenerate things" (*mortalibus caducisque*; III.9.88).

With the suggestion that our world is fallen, a new view of reality begins to emerge. This is glimpsed in the great Hymn to the Creator ('*O qui perpetua*'; III.m9), the turning point for the entire *Consolation*.<sup>14</sup> Much has been written about this poem; it is important for our purposes because it offers a cosmological vantage point from which the prisoner can see his world for what it really is. This is a vision that requires a more than human perspective. The hymn concludes with a plea for a beatific vision unimpeded by the material world:

Grant, Father, that our minds Thy august seat may scan,  
Grant us the sight of true good's source, and grant us light  
That we may fix on Thee our mind's unblinded eye.  
Disperse the clouds of earthly matter's cloying weight;  
Shine out in all thy glory; for thou are rest and peace  
To those who worship Thee; to see Thee is our end,  
Who are our source and maker, lord and path and goal. (III.m9.22-28)

If Philosophy's prayer is granted, what will be revealed will change forever the prisoner's perception of the familiar world. Once the prisoner has glimpsed his maker and goal, he can look back on the world below and see its full significance for the first time.

The radical reorientation that is consequent upon glimpsing our source and goal is expressed powerfully in the following section, III.10. In its prose segment, Philosophy argues that happiness cannot be found in the natural world (*in rerum natura*), for it is

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<sup>14</sup> For the poem as the center of the work's metrical scheme, see J. Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius De Consolatione Philosophiae, Text und Kommentare 9* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1978), 19-24, 230-32; as center of a numerological scheme, see E. Scarry, "The Well-Rounded Sphere: The Metaphysical Structure of the *Consolation of Philosophy*" in C. D. Elkhardt, ed., *Essays in the Numerical Criticism of Medieval Literature* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1980); as a turning point from literal to figurative meaning of the poems, see Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue*, 138-44; as the point from which explicit Neoplatonic themes emerge, see Courcelle, *Late Latin Writers*, 163-84. For extended analysis of the poem, see F. Klingner, *De Boethii Consolatione Philosophiae* (Berlin: Philologische Untersuchungen von Kiessling, 1921), 38-66; Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius*, 277-90.

imperfect. The imperfect world, she says, has its origin in that which is perfect and then “degenerates into this fallen and worn out condition” (*in haec extrema atque effeta dilabatur*; III.10.18). In the section’s concluding poem, Philosophy invites those who are captive of earthly desires to seek her refuge. In doing so, they will in effect reorient their perception of things. They will learn to shun all those false candidates for happiness—expressed symbolically in the poem as the gold and gems that spring from dark earthly caverns—and the sun itself will seem less bright:

For all that thus excites and charms the mind  
Dim earth has fostered in her caverns deep;  
While that bright light which rules and animates  
The sky, will shun such dark and ruined souls:  
Whoever once shall see this shining light  
Will say the sun’s own rays are not so bright. (III.m10.13-18)

Once the prisoner has seen the abode of God, the world of ordinary ambitions will be revealed for what it is: a degenerate, fallen place from which we must endeavor to escape if one is ever to enjoy true happiness.

III.11 contributes to the parabolic structure through a double reference to Plato. Its prose section consists of a long argument indebted to the *Symposium* showing that all things, including animals, plants, and even inanimate objects, have a natural desire for their proper place and for self-preservation. This—though of course they do not know it—is a desire for unity, which in turn is a desire for the good (III.11.104-109). In other words, ordinary animal desire functions on two levels, both the physical and the metaphysical, with the former ultimately for the sake of the latter. Anyone who considers only the physical will be unaware of a higher purpose. Metrum III.m11 moves the argument in a different, though still Platonic direction. It speaks of the need to turn the mind’s gaze inward to perceive the hidden seeds of truth, for as Plato had taught,

learning is really recollection of what had been known, but was lost (III.m11.15-16). Again, a true understanding can be obtained only by a change in the direction of one's vision.

The reference to Platonic anamnesis might seem at odds with what had been said previously. The same metrum begins by calling on the prisoner to turn his gaze inward: "Whoever deeply searches out the truth/ ... Shall turn unto himself his inward gaze..." (III.m11, 1-3). But this creates a tension with the claim earlier in Book III that one's gaze must be turned upward. And one could say there is a further tension going back to the beginning of the *Consolation*: the prisoner's problem as the work opened was too great a focus on his inner state of mind. A call for introspection, though requiring a change in the direction of the prisoner's gaze, does not immediately square with what Lady Philosophy has said or implied previously.

To resolve the tension, we may turn to III.12, the book's concluding section, to which the poem in III.11 provides the transition. At the start of III.12, Boethius is on the verge of remembering his true home and the source of real happiness. But Philosophy's mentioning of Plato prompts a puzzling comment from the prisoner:

I agree very strongly with Plato. This is the second time you have reminded me of these matters. The first time was because I had lost the memory through the influence (*contagione*) of the body, and this second time because I lost it when I became overwhelmed by the weight of my grief. (III.12.1-4)

What are the two instances of forgetting he speaks of, and when did each occur?

We must, I think, take the *second* forgetting to refer to the entire episode in the prison, beginning with the tear-soaked elegy that opens the *Consolation*.<sup>15</sup> It was the weight of his grief over his

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<sup>15</sup> For a different reading, see Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius*, 308.

unjust imprisonment that led to the lethargy that Lady Philosophy came to cure. The *first* forgetting, Boethius says, was produced through contact with the body. We should not suppose some earlier tragic episode preceding the events of the *Consolation*, of which Boethius has chosen not speak. For Lady Philosophy praised him at the beginning (I.2 and 3) for having been raised since his youth as a loyal member of her house. Rather, I think it must refer to the soul's incarnation in the body prior to one's birth on earth. As did Plato in the *Meno* and *Phaedo*, Boethius believes that the soul existed in a preincarnated state.<sup>16</sup>

If this reading is correct, it provides an answer to the tension between the calls for introspection on the one hand and an upward vision on the other—and ultimately furnishes a profound additional dimension to the parable. The meaning of our existence depends on the soul's relation to another world, but most human beings are unaware of this relation. More precisely, they have forgotten it, as III.11 is meant to show. By being driven to look inward to what Boethius calls the inner seeds of truth—an initially dim recollection of the soul's preembodied state—the suffering human being will see signs that the soul is essentially independent of the body. As a result, he or she will recognize that the world in its fallen state is utterly inadequate to provide the happiness that all human beings naturally seek. What is revealed by the progression over the course of Book III is the pivotal role played by evil and suffering in the individual's turning inward from the world and ultimately upward to the next.

At the same time (though in a different way), Boethius shows the reader that evil is imbued with a Janus-like character, pulling

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<sup>16</sup> This passage should be compared with V.2 regarding the degrees of freedom of the soul. The first forgetting of the present passage corresponds to the second degree of freedom identified there as freedom from embodiment. See further Crabbe, "Literary Design," 258-59.

the soul backwards even as it would move forward. This becomes apparent in a masterful sequence extending from the end of Book III into Book IV. At first it seems as if Boethius has at last overcome his grief. Philosophy assures the prisoner there is little left for her to do to make Boethius happy and return him safely to his homeland (III.12.27-29). The prisoner gives her reason to think so, for he speaks confidently of his certainty that God rules over the various and conflicting parts of the universe, unifying them and imposing order on them.<sup>17</sup> Philosophy in reply praises the prisoner's clear vision at this point. Boethius proclaims himself very happy at hearing her highest argument (as well as her words, taken from the Book of Wisdom), and feels ashamed at his earlier complaint. His grief seems completely forgotten.

It is not forgotten, however. Before it can be forgotten, the prisoner will require Lady Philosophy to reconcile evil with God's beneficent governance of all things. The sequence will complete the revaluation of the world and solve the problem of evil in terms of the parable that the author Boethius is unfolding. It will show that the key to the parable is found in the correct perspective toward suffering.

The next mention of grief is not the prisoner's. Book III of the *Consolation of Philosophy* concludes with what became the most celebrated part of the entire work, Lady Philosophy's poetic retelling of the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice. Boethius was not the first to tell the story.<sup>18</sup> But his version grew immensely popular in the

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<sup>17</sup> Lerer calls it a "misguided self-confidence"; Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue*, 145.

<sup>18</sup> It had appeared centuries earlier in the final part of Virgil's *Georgics* (beginning at 4.453); it opens Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (beginning at 10.1); see also Seneca *Medea* beginning at 625 and following, *Hercules Furens* beginning at 561 and following, and [Seneca] *Hercules Oetaeus* beginning at 1031 and following. For detailed comparisons of Boethius' retelling with these earlier versions, see Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue*, 160-64; O'Daly, *The Poetry of Boethius*, 192-99; Astell, *Job, Boethius, and Epic Truth*, 55-60.

Middle Ages. And no wonder. The mortal Orpheus, whose music could tame wild beasts and calm the seas, travels to the Underworld to retrieve the soul of his dead wife, Eurydice. The spirits of the Underworld are so moved by the grieving husband that they agree to let the soul of Eurydice leave with him. The only condition (*lex*) is that Orpheus not look back at his wife until they are out of Hell. But Orpheus fails. As they near the top he glances back, and so loses Eurydice forever.

Why in a work that warns against being ruled by passion does Philosophy sing so movingly of the unfortunate Orpheus?<sup>19</sup> Every sensitive reader feels a certain empathy with Orpheus, as the story's medieval popularity attests.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, so careful a commentator as Walsh thinks that "Boethius himself succumbs to the pathos of the story and undercuts the philosophical message with which the poem ends."<sup>21</sup> Walsh's judgment in this regard is not a simple misreading. Boethius' retelling is undeniably poignant. But in a writer as subtle as Boethius, we would be well advised to seek a function for the poignancy, a way in which it serves the author's overall purpose.<sup>22</sup>

To understand why Boethius creates such a poignant retelling, one must see that in the poem—itsself a parable within the larger structure of the *Consolation*—Boethius concisely expresses the parable of world.<sup>23</sup> The parable can be represented as a

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<sup>19</sup> "Taken literally and without benefit of Neoplatonic allegory there is nothing in the tale of which Philosophy can approve"; A. Crabbe, "Anamnesis and Mythology in the *De Consolatione Philosophiae*," in L. Obertello ed., *Atti, Congresso Internazionale de Studi Boeziani* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1981), 314.

<sup>20</sup> According to Curley, "How to Read the *Consolation of Philosophy*," 228-32, Boethius has served as "the spokesman for suffering humanity"; O'Daly, *The Poetry of Boethius*, 192, notes sympathetically that "Orpheus' failure is complex and includes considerable success."

<sup>21</sup> Walsh, 144 n. m51. Contrast Crabbe, "Anamnesis and Mythology," 313-14.

<sup>22</sup> Both Crabbe and O'Daly, for instance, contrast the Orpheus poem with the *Consolation's* noisy opening elegy.

<sup>23</sup> That the poem is a parable (or perhaps an allegory) for the prisoner's own

continuous proportion. As the Hell of the story is to this world, so this world is to the next. Just as the musician sought to escape from the hellish Underworld and return to his home above, so the prisoner to be happy must strive to escape from the prison of this world in order to return to his true home in the next. And not just the prisoner: the poem enables the reader to see this world for what it really is: an “underworld of afflictive earthly struggle” as Astell calls it,<sup>24</sup> a realm of shadows of happiness that must be fled if true happiness is ever to be enjoyed. Not just Orpheus, not even just the prisoner, but the reader is in a veritable Hell. Boethius’ retelling of the Orpheus legend is meant to show that life on this earth and all the apparent evils that happen here—even and especially death—are parabolic, and that their meaning can be found only through the escape that death provides.<sup>25</sup>

More precisely, Orpheus represents not so much human beings in general as the fallen or descended soul specifically and its need to escape from materiality.<sup>26</sup> In this way the poem dramatically recalls the two forgettings Boethius spoke of at the opening of the section. The earlier of these forgettings was brought on by the soul’s descent into the body, with Orpheus’ entry into the Underworld standing for the human soul’s descent into corporeality. Here Boethius exploits the neo-Platonic identification of this world with a fallen Tartarus, an identification that itself goes back to Plato’s depiction of the world in the cave allegory of the *Republic*.<sup>27</sup>

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situation is recognized by many commentators. See for example Crabbe, “Anamnesis and Mythology,” 313-14; Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue*, 168; O’Daly, *The Poetry of Boethius*, 191-92; Astell, *Job, Boethius, and Epic Truth*, 42-43.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>25</sup> Thus, Orpheus’ failure consists of his inability to see a higher purpose for the escape of death, the greatest apparent evil; see *ibid.*, 59. Astell goes so far as to identify the lesson of the poem as the revealed truth prayed for in III.m9; *ibid.*, 46.

<sup>26</sup> For a thorough treatment of this dimension of the poem, see O’Daly, *The Poetry of Boethius*, 188-207.

<sup>27</sup> See Klingner, *De Boethii Consolatione Philosophiae*, 30 and following; Crabbe,

As the soul recovers from the first forgetting, it seeks to escape the hell of the material world, which in every way imprisons it. Just as it is about to complete its escape, a second forgetting brought on by grief distracts it from its goal. The happiness that had been in reach is suddenly lost.

Just as Orpheus fails to escape, so the prisoner is in danger of failing. This becomes clear when we analyze the next stage of the sequence, the opening paragraphs of Book IV. The song of Orpheus deeply affects the prisoner. Despite—or rather because of—the song’s theme, he is reminded of the pain of this world.<sup>28</sup> As Lady Philosophy is about to continue, the prisoner interrupts her:

Philosophy delivered this sweet and gentle song with dignity of countenance and gravity of expression. But I had still not forgotten the grief within me and I cut her short just as she was preparing to say something.

‘You,’ I said, ‘who are my leader towards the true light, all that you have poured forth in speech up to now has been clearly both divine to contemplate and invincibly supported by your arguments. You have spoken of things I had forgotten because of the pain of what I had suffered, but before this they were not entirely unknown to me.

‘But the greatest cause of my sadness is really this—the fact that in spite of a good helmsman to guide the world, evil can still exist and even pass unpunished. This fact alone you must surely think of considerable wonder (*admiratione*). But there is something even more bewildering. When wickedness rules and flourishes, not only does virtue go unrewarded, it is even trodden underfoot by the wicked and punished in the place of crime. That this can happen in the realm of an omniscient and omnipotent God who wills only good, is beyond perplexity (*admirari*) and complaint.’ (IV.1.1-19)

In these lines the problem of evil returns in full force. Expressed in terms reminiscent of its original statement in Book I, its reappearance here implies that the prisoner’s progress is in

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“Anamnesis and Mythology,” 316-17.

<sup>28</sup> Astell, *Job, Boethius, and Epic Truth*, 60, sees Boethius as showing eagerness for Philosophy’s further instruction. In addition to my argument here, I would say that contrasting these lines with with the opening lines of Books III and V makes her interpretation implausible.

jeopardy. For his therapy to be successful, he must remember his true nature and destiny. But this recollection is blocked by another memory, the memory of his present grief. Recalling *in more Platonico* what he had forgotten is not enough. He must also forget what his aggrieved sense of injustice recalls.<sup>29</sup>

The author Boethius has carefully prepared for this outburst in the sequence of ideas going back to the opening words of III.12. He began by having the prisoner speak of a forgetfulness brought on by grief. The prisoner's grief seemed to have been dispelled by assurances of God's good governance of the world. But that was followed by Lady Philosophy's asserting the paradox of the nothingness of evil. While the prisoner welcomed this claim intellectually, his suffering is too acute to be brushed aside as nothing. The tale of Orpheus serves as a map of the prisoner's subterranean emotions, which forcefully surface in the opening paragraphs of Book IV.<sup>30</sup>

If the hymn to the creator in III.m9 is the intellectual climax of the *Consolation*, this is its moment of greatest dramatic crisis. The prisoner remains tied to the world by the evil it has visited on him. His final link to the world is not love (of wife, of children, of friends), but pain. The author's control of this crucial dramatic episode shows that he has not succumbed to the emotional pathos of the Orpheus legend, but makes it an essential stage in his lesson.

In effect, the rest of *Consolation* Book IV responds to the

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<sup>29</sup> For the interaction of memory and forgetting as a central theme in the *Consolation*, see O'Daly, *The Poetry of Boethius*, 200-201. Crabbe, "Literary Design," 258, finds "most striking in the passages immediately following the Timaeus poem, particularly the metra III.xi and xii and IV.i ... the stress on the theme of memory and forgetfulness." On the crucial need to forget the pain we suffer in this life, I am indebted to my colleague George Heffernan and his paper, "Augustine on Memory and Lethargy."

<sup>30</sup> Crabbe, "Literary Design," 259: "The Orpheus myth becomes a self-portrait of a man who has bent his eyes once more to the depths from which he had almost emerged." See also Crabbe, "Anamnesis and Mythology," 312-16.

resurgent problem of evil by providing something like an apocalyptic vision.<sup>31</sup> Philosophy will reveal to the prisoner that God utilizes the world's evil for his own higher purposes. The very suffering that caused the prisoner's lethargy will be revealed to have a profoundly different significance. At the same time, a new theme emerges: that of the inherent limits of human knowledge.<sup>32</sup> While events in the world infallibly reflect God's intentions, the plan itself will remain forever hidden. Thus, the limits of human knowledge will define the boundaries of Philosophy's revelation. As much as she reveals to the prisoner, there is much more that he as a mortal man will never be able to comprehend. At the same time, the limits will serve to show why, at the profoundest level, parables are much more than an elegant literary device. The need for parables arises out of the very nature of our existence as finite beings.

Philosophy's revelation will completely alter the prisoner's understanding. The significance of the reorientation of vision is indicated by the closing metrum of IV.1.<sup>33</sup> Rather than responding immediately to the prisoner's complaint, Boethius has Philosophy suggest that recollecting God as the ultimate destination of the soul will lead to a consequent despising of the world below. Using imagery from Plato's *Phaedrus*, she begins with a promise:

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<sup>31</sup> Crabbe, "Literary Design," 238: "Boethius receives a theophany, an apocalyptic vision." But, Varis, *The Consolation of Boethius*, 5, notes that Philosophy's words come as argument, not revelation. J. Relihan, trans., *Boethius: Consolation of Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2001), xi, argues that a beatific vision is never achieved, playfully suggesting the work could be called "Apocalypse Denied." Curley, "How to Read the *Consolation of Philosophy*," 238-40, seems to find an apocalypse in the work's final three sections (V.4-6), describing Philosophy's role there as that of Sybil. M. Cherniss, *Boethian Apocalypse* (Norman: Pilgrim Books, 1987), identifies a special genre of medieval literature, the "Boethian apocalypse."

<sup>32</sup> The theme of the limits of human knowledge extends into Book V, where human understanding is contrasting with divine foreknowledge. Following the theme there extends beyond the purposes of this paper.

<sup>33</sup> "The necessary complement and extension of the themes of 3m12"; O'Daly, *The Poetry of Boethius*, 202 and 205.

For I have swift and speedy wings  
 With which to mount the lofty skies  
 and when the mind has put them on  
 The earth below it will despise. . . . (IV.m1.1-4)

The prisoner is promised both an escape and a new perspective. Once the soul has escaped its earthly chains, it will be free to look back upon the benighted Earth with impunity, seeing its tyrants for the exiles they really are.<sup>34</sup> This is no minor revelation. In the first line of Prose IV.2, the prisoner cries out at the magnitude of her promises.

The fulfillment of Philosophy's promises begins the final stage of the parabolic sequence at the heart of the *Consolation*. Whereas in Book III Lady Philosophy worked to turn the prisoner's vision upward, over the course of IV.2, IV.3, and 4, she encourages the prisoner to look back on the world. With the key provided by the retelling of the Orpheus legend, features of this world can be seen from a new perspective. She proceeds to demonstrate first, that the good are always strong and the wicked always weak (IV.2); second, that the good are rewarded by becoming divine, while the wicked are punished by becoming animals (IV.3); and finally that the wicked are actually punished by being allowed to achieve their ends (IV.4).

Beyond these confident conclusions, Philosophy's revelation moves in a new and different direction. The prisoner appears to agree with what she has said, but at the start of IV.5 admits that he still finds some validity in the popularly perceived difference between good and bad fortune. For God seems to be variable and inconstant, now treating the good well and the evil harshly, but other times just the reverse. This, he says, provokes his wonder (*mirarer*) and amazement (*stuporem*). How, he asks, can one distinguish between God as a cause and mere chance?

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<sup>34</sup> See also Crabbe, "Anamnesis and Mythology," 318.

Lady Philosophy answers with a firm insistence of the limits of human knowledge. She replies that there is no cause to wonder (*nec mirum*; IV.5.22-23), and implies, both in the closing lines of the prose and in metrum IV.m5, that the appearance of chaos is due only to human ignorance of the hidden cause of order. Our inability to know the plan of the universe should not make us doubt that everything happens for the right reason. Though she does not say so directly for several sections, Philosophy is already implying that all Fortune is good, and that every instance of evil is in fact part of the divine plan, if only they could be seen from that perspective.

The real answer—the apocalypse, to the extent Boethius is granted one—comes in IV.6.<sup>35</sup> Human ignorance of God’s plan is at the heart of this, the longest prose of the *Consolation*. The prisoner begs Philosophy to “unravel the causes of matters that lie hidden and to unfold reasons veiled in darkness” and so put an end to his wonder (IV.6.1-5). Philosophy does not object, but notes that he is asking the greatest of all questions, one that no discourse can adequately answer. A lengthy treatment of the distinction between Providence and Fate follows, leading again to the idea that it is human ignorance springing from a limited perspective that makes things seem chaotic. God’s Providence embraces all things, but we who suffer the limits of Time cannot see this, and so we wonder: “It is because you men are in no position to contemplate (*considerare*) this order that everything seems confused and upset” (IV.6.94-96). This is true particularly in the moral sphere. Human understanding is unable to grasp the means by which God works to heal sick minds, perfectly fitting the cure to each individual. “This, then, is the outstanding wonder (*miraculum*) of the order of fate; a knowing God

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<sup>35</sup> C. J. Starnes, “Boethius and the Development of Christian Humanism,” in Obertello ed., *Atti, Congresso Internazionale*, 36, describes IV.6 as providing “the true knowledge that a created understanding can have” of the relation of the God known by natural reason and God as divine governor of the world in time.

acts and ignorant men look on with wonder (stupeant) at his actions” (IV.6.124-25). To look upon divinely ordered events and believe otherwise is to cling to a perverse confusion (IV.6.133).

There is, in fact, a plan behind all the seemingly variable acts of God. Though men cannot see his purpose, Philosophy instructs the prisoner that God uses adversity to bring human beings to self-knowledge. In a remarkable passage, the author Boethius has Lady Philosophy tell the prisoner awaiting execution that, “There is no doubt that it is right that these things happen, that they are planned and that they are suited to those to whom they actually happen” (IV.6.157-59).

The long prose section ends with one final reminder of the limits of human understanding. All things are part of the overall order. But it is hard, even for Lady Philosophy, to speak from a god-like perspective. Quoting a line from the *Iliad*,<sup>36</sup> she limits even her own discourse:

‘Tis hard for me to speak as though a God.’ And it is not allowed to man to comprehend in thought all the ways of the divine work or expound them in speech. (IV.6.196-99)

“Let it be enough” (*sufficiat*), she tells her patient, that the argument has shown that God directs all things toward the good. “Evil is thought to abound on earth. But if you could see the plan of Providence, you would not think there was evil anywhere” (IV.6.204-6). What appears to us as evil is a product of limited human perception. Evil turns out to be nothing after all.

The higher purpose of misfortune was signaled already in the final prose of Book II: “Good fortune deceives, but bad fortune enlightens . . . . Had you remained untouched and, as you thought, blessed by Fortune, you would have been unable to get such

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<sup>36</sup> On the significance of the citation of Homer, see Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue*, 211-14; Astell, *Job, Boethius, and Epic Truth*, 46-48.

knowledge at any price” (II.8.11-24). But there Philosophy could do no more than state the paradox that adverse Fortune was good (II.8.5-8). Now at the end of IV, after having shown the prisoner both the gifts of Fortune as well as the evils of the physical world from a truer perspective, she can reveal as much as a human may know of God’s purposes. In IV.7, Philosophy leads Boethius to the conclusion that all Fortune is good. Misfortunes are not random; we are not buffeted by chance. Everything that happens is part of a plan—either to punish, to correct, or to strengthen human beings (IV.7.22). The whims of Fortune are for the wise man like battle for a courageous one—they provide the opportunity for each to exercise and strengthen his characteristic virtue. “Their very distress is an opportunity, for the one to gain glory and the other to strengthen his wisdom.”<sup>37</sup> And so in place of the failed Orpheus, Book IV ends with a different parable: the triumph of Hercules.<sup>38</sup> Whereas the musician had reached the edge of the world he sought to escape only to turn back and fail, Hercules shoulders the weight of the world and earns a place in heaven as a reward for his virtue.

No doubt many parables are no more than elegant figures of speech and literary ornaments (as the *Oxford Companion to the Bible*’s definition of parable cited at the opening of this paper might be said to imply). If human beings could know all things fully and directly, this is what all parables would be.<sup>39</sup> But the profound limits of human knowledge have literary as well as philosophical

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 43; Astell uses this comparison to support her claim that the *Consolation* teaches an “epic truth.”

<sup>38</sup> O’Daly obscures this contrast by drawing attention to Hercules’ own descent to the Underworld and its tragic consequences. But Boethius makes no mention of that part of the Hercules myth. He focuses instead on Hercules’ fortitude in the labor that Boethius places last in his retelling, and on its heavenly reward. But see O’Daly, *The Poetry of Boethius*, 220-32; also Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue*, following 190.

<sup>39</sup> See also O’Daly, *The Poetry of Boethius*, vii.

implications. The limits of what mortals may know both motivate and necessitate the use of parables. If souls are imprisoned in physical bodies and tossed in a confusion of emotion and passion, if human beings are trapped in a degenerate world and bound within the confines of Time, any talk during this life of a higher realm would necessarily be parabolic. The world itself, as the product of a Maker whose skills infinitely surpass any earthly poet's or philosopher's and whose intelligence infinitely exceeds all human understanding, would be the ultimate parable, the profoundest creation in need of interpretation.<sup>40</sup>

Once grasped for what it is, the parable of the world provides a complete reorientation, an apprehension of everything from a new perspective. We continue to see just what we have always seen—a world dominated by wealth, position, and fame, ruled by tyrants, besotted by physical pleasures—but now we see these things for what they really are and no longer identify them as the source of our happiness. The turning of the soul is essentially a redirecting of our aspirations. And not just of our aspirations, but of what might be called our desperations, those things that cause us to lose hope. For now evil and suffering are seen as part of a larger whole. Those very things that formerly drove us to despair now provide the key to the meaning of the whole. We now know that the seemingly random strokes of Fortune possess a higher meaning. We are able to see in the apparent triumph of evil a sign of a higher purpose.

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<sup>40</sup> My theme has been anticipated by two commentators who take opposite sides on the question of Boethius' Christianity. Starnes, "Boethius and the Development of Christian Humanism," 36, defending Boethius' Christianity, expresses a central idea of the parable of the world: "because this world has an absolute significance, its end is not comprehended in purely finite categories." For Curley, "How to Read the *Consolation of Philosophy*," 255, who minimizes the Roman's orthodoxy, the universe is God's "supreme fiction." From God's perspective, "the world constitutes a poem and must be read as such."