

Responses to Wians

1. Interpreting Parables within Parables

The guiding assumption of William Wians' "Evil and the Parable of the World in *The Consolation of Philosophy*" is that parables are not mere filigree, but serve as incalculably valuable means for coming to grips with what, perhaps, lies beyond our ken. Wians' argument, in brief, is that Boethius' *Consolation* contains two parables worthy of attention, one within the other. The 'parable of the world' contains the parable of the myth of Orpheus, wherein the latter serves as the critical reminder about the claim that evil has upon the natural order, which in turn is the intellectual hurdle thematic for the former. These parables are worth one's attention because they illuminate the aim and hope of the philosophical life while, at the same time, revealing its clear limitation.

There are many positive things to say about this approach. In the first place, such an approach makes plain many of the Neo-Platonic and Augustinian elements of Boethius' reflections. As Wians explains, the 'parable of the world' is, itself, told through a fiction: the prisoner's conversation with Lady Philosophy. By writing a dialogue, Boethius provides not just an argument for a Neo-Platonic assent from worldly concerns to the goodness of the One, he provides us with a model. The reader is conditioned by Boethius "to discern a significance in events that goes beyond what appears at the surface" (46) and thus come eventually 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... a true understanding can be obtained only by a change in the direction of one's vision" (51-2). Thus, Wians is adept at drawing out the essential claim that the parable of the world is everyone's story. To come to grips with ourselves and the fallen world, we must recall that truth, happiness and, indeed our very essence as human beings are not really here; the gaze inward at our souls can only come to proper resolution and rest when we gaze upward at the complete, perfect good of the deity.

Correspondingly, the parable of the myth of Orpheus, placed so centrally at the end of *Consolation*, Book III, is a pointed reminder of evil's effects, even as we seek to lift our gaze. Wians'

reading of the Orpheus myth as the parable-within-the-parable is delightful, for it picks out how clearly Boethius recognizes the struggle within himself (54-9). The sorrowful account of Orpheus's failure to return from Hades with his beloved Eurydice reinforces the draw that all the worldly, false goods—power, wealth, fame, honor—have upon humanity. Like the plays-within-plays in Shakespearian drama (the marriage play in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example), the resolution only occurs after the theme is itself revealed within the drama, and the players are somehow altered by this revelation.

And yet, throughout this thoughtful engagement with the structure of *Consolation*, I think Wians himself attends too closely to the attractiveness of evil as encountered by the prisoner and by Orpheus. That is, hidden behind his valuable presentation, I think he somewhat undercuts the lesson that Boethius dearly prizes from beginning to end: we ought not make purchase on evil as having any real power. This is evident in Wians' persistent statement that the lesson of the parable(s) is that, since our happiness is not of this world, we must learn to shun the world, escape it and know it for the hellish place it is and will always be (46-52, 56, 64). Only once does he express that the text proposes a worldly counterbalance to the apparent victory of evil: virtue (63). As a consequence, the concluding statements of the article are jarring when juxtaposed with what precedes it; Lady Philosophy's explanation of the providential order as altering the prisoner's view is an all-of-a-sudden, apocalyptic inversion rather than the result of a gradual assent (61-4).

While there are, admittedly, few mentions of virtue in Books II and III, I would submit that the theodicy of Books III-V does not advocate only 'working-for-death' in order to see worldly suffering in its proper light. On the contrary, the ameliorative lesson can be discovered here and now because of the promise of supernatural happiness. Wians notes that Lady Philosophy's ability to explain providence is limited due to the limited human ability to apprehend that with which they are unfamiliar (61-4). However, it does not follow that, for Boethius, we must remain unfamiliar with providence's work in ourselves.

The very drama of the parables reveals that we can see the orderliness of the world beyond the daily vicissitudes of human action because we can come to know our own perfectibility in virtue.

At *Consolation* II.6, III.4, III.5 respectively, Lady Philosophy picks out the value of virtue in comparison with honor and power. Since honor and power are conferred by something beyond human control, namely fortune, the part of nature within humanity's grasp serves as its own reward. Attending to virtue is to come to know one's self while in the world, before death. To be sure, this account of virtue does resolve into a description of perfection in the argument for God's existence in III.10. However, the account is not complete until *Consolation*, V.6, when Lady Philosophy, by distinguishing between simple and conditional necessity, argues that human freedom fits within providence. Since our freedom is not simply forced by God's knowledge, but is nonetheless conditionally necessary for our existence as what we are, we cannot help but know our virtue through our freedom, freedom which is *here and now*.

Looking once again at the prominently placed parable-within-the-parable, I think the retelling of the myth of Orpheus is, perhaps, richer in meaning than Wians' account, helpful as it is. The full consolation is that, despite the similarities with his faults, Boethius is not like Orpheus. He is not fated by his desires to always be only what natural necessity commands in earthly life. The reader witnesses the prisoner's gradual reminder of who he is and can say, at the very moment of his last retreat to grief in Orpheus' defeat: "But I can see where you were and where you're going! You are not he." While I agree with Wians that the story of Hercules recounted at the end of Book IV is not merely nugatory (63), I believe it only makes explicit what is implicated all along. Like plays-within-plays, dramatic irony proposes the truth to the reader long before it is evident for the *dramatis personae*. The conception of freedom expressed in Book V is foreshadowed throughout the text. It is not something merely hoped for and ideal, but actually present in the imprisoned Boethius, evidenced by his virtue, despite his grief. Without it, there could be no true hope or consolation from Lady Philosophy's explanation of providence, imperfect as it is.

~John Teepen Schlachter