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*Pope and Boethius*

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*The fortunes of The Consolation of Philosophy in the modern world roughly parallel the fortunes of a rigorous belief in Divine Providence. Much of the puzzlement evinced by modern critics concerning both Pope's Essay and Johnson's Rasselas might be alleviated by a careful study of Boethius. For Rasselas, see Boswell's Life, sub anno 1759. When "eternity" came to mean "infinite time" rather than an eternal present outside time, as it did for Dr. Samuel Clarke, in his celebrated controversy with Leibnitz, much of the argument in the Consolation became obscure.*



POPE'S interest in the *De consolazione philosophiae* of Boethius is attested by his partial translation of the ninth meter of the third book, completed, perhaps, "not later than 1710."<sup>1</sup> The translation involves only the first four and the last seven lines of the original meter, leaving the intervening seventeen lines unused. The meter itself is a kind of poetic summary of the beginning of Plato's *Timaeus*, although it is probable that Boethius was actually interested in the Christian implications of these materials. Pope's translation omits the obviously Platonic content of the meter, so that the result gives the impression of being a thoroughly Christian prayer. In the original the poem is an invocation to "the Father of all things." It begins,

O qui perpetua mundum ratione gubernas  
Terrarum caelique sator qui tempus ab aeuo  
Ire iubes stabilisque manens das cuncta moueri,  
Quem non externae pepulerunt fingere causae. . . .

Pope translates:

O thou, whose all-creating hands sustain  
The radiant Heav'ns, and Earth, and ambient main!  
Eternal Reason! whose presiding soul  
Informs great nature and directs the whole!  
Who wert, e're time his rapid race begun,  
And bad'st the years in long procession run:

Who fix't thy self amidst the rowling frame,  
Gav'st all things to be chang'd, yet ever art the same!<sup>2</sup>

The expression "perpetua . . . ratione," which emphasizes the idea that God continuously maintains a reasonable order in His guidance of the world, gives rise to Pope's more explicitly Christian epithet, "Eternal Reason." The use of Reason here rather than the more traditional Wisdom is faintly suggestive of an attitude toward the Deity somewhat like that expressed by Locke's "eternal cogitative being." Again, "terrarum caelique sator" produces the generalized "all-creating hands," and, in addition to heaven and earth, the "ambient main," added, perhaps, for the sake of rhyme. It is possible that Pope may have remembered the "fluctus auidum mare" of 2, met. 8.9. The original reflects the Platonic doctrine of the creation of time, familiar in the *Timaeus*, but Pope's "Who wert, e're time his rapid race begun" emphasized the eternity of God in a manner suggestive of conventional interpretations of the opening verses of the Gospel of John. Changes in emphasis in the translation of the last seven lines are not so marked. However, the original concludes with the lines,

Tu requies tranquilla piis, te cernere finis,  
Principium, uector, dux, semita, terminus idem.

Pope substitutes the righteous for the pious, perhaps to suggest rational justice:

In thee the righteous find  
Calm rest, and soft serenity of mind . . .

Finally, in the last line he once more emphasizes the idea of eternity:

Our utmost bound, and our eternal stay!

Altogether, Pope showed little interest at this time in the expression of Christian ideas in Platonic language. His translation is an interpretation which leaves nothing puzzling or misleading for the "righteous" reader.

The editors of Pope's *Minor Poems* suggest a parallel between lines 3-4, 7-8 as they are quoted above and lines 267-270 of the first Epistle of *The Essay on Man*:<sup>3</sup>

All are but parts of one stupendous whole,  
Whose body Nature is, and God the soul;  
That, chang'd thro' all, and yet in all the same,  
Great in the earth, as in th'aethereal frame. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Although Maynard Mack cites other parallels for this passage in the notes to his edition of the poem which certainly indicate that the ideas it contains were not uncommon, the lines may nevertheless be thought of as a reflection of the Boethian meter. The second line quoted above includes the Platonic concept of the "world-soul," a concept which had been widely used for Christian purposes throughout the Middle Ages, especially after the middle of the twelfth century. The same concept appears in the portion of the meter which Pope did not translate:

Tu triplicis mediam naturae cuncta mouentem  
Conectens animam per consona membra resoluis.

This fact suggests that if Pope had the meter in mind when he wrote his lines in the *Essay*, he was thinking of the original and not of his translation. Be that as it may, there are other passages in the *Essay* which may have been suggested by Pope's reading of Boethius.

For example, in 1.5.131ff., *Pride*, or the proud man, falls into "the Absurdity of conceiting himself the Final Cause of the Creation":<sup>5</sup>

Ask for what end the heav'nly bodies shine,  
Earth for whose use? *Pride* answers, "'Tis for mine:  
"For me kind Nature wakes her genial pow'r,  
"Suckles each herb, and spreads out ev'ry flow'r;  
"Annual for me, the grape, the rose renew  
"The juice nectareous, and the balmy dew;  
"For me, the mine a thousand treasures brings;  
"For me, health gushes from a thousand springs;  
"Seas roll to waft me, suns to light me rise;  
"My foot-stool earth, my canopy the skies."

With this we may compare *De cons.* 2, pr. 5.31ff.:

An uos agrorum pulchritudo delectat? Quidni? Est enim pulcherrimi operis pulchra portio. Sic quondam sereni maris facie gaudemus; sic caelum sidera lunam solemque miramur. Num te horum aliquid attingit? Num audes alicuius talium splendore gloriari? An uernis floribus ipse distingueris aut tua in aestiuos fructus intumescit ubertas? Quid inanibus gaudiis raperis? Quid externa bona pro tuis amplexaris?

The heavenly bodies and the annual succession of Nature's bounties display, as Pope says in his essay "On Nature and Death," the "Wisdom and Power of their Creator";<sup>6</sup> they are not the special property of any single man. Pope goes on to condemn the proud, as he says in his

note, for "expecting that perfection in the moral world which is not in the natural." Just as there are plagues and earthquakes, deviations in nature, so also there are deviations in man:

If plagues and earthquakes break not Heav'n's design,  
Why then a Borgia, or a Catiline?  
(155-156)

The proper attitude toward both forms of deviation is to submit:

Why charge we Heav'n in those, in these acquit?  
In both, to reason right is to submit.  
(163-164)

We may find a similar attitude toward natural disasters and tyrants in *De cons.* 1. met. 4:

Quisquis composito serenus aeuo  
Fatum sub pedibus egit superbum  
Fortunamque tuens utramque rectus  
Inuictum potuit tenere uultum,  
Non illum rabies minaeque ponti  
Versum funditus exagitantis aestum  
Nec ruptis quotiens uagus caminis  
Torquet fumificos Vesaeuus ignes  
Aut celsas soliti ferire turres  
Ardentis uia fulminis mouebit.  
Quid tantum miseri saeuos tyrannos  
Mirantur sine uiribus furentes?

Pope concludes that

The gen'ral *Order*, since the whole began,  
Is kept in Nature, and is kept in Man.  
(171-172)

It is certainly Lady Philosophy's intention to demonstrate the Providential order in the affairs of men, and she has exactly the same problem to contend with that Pope faced later. For the disconsolate Boethius complains, 1. met. 5.25ff.:

Omnia certo fine gubernans  
Hominum solos respuis actus  
Merito rector cohibere modo.

The first epistle of the *Essay* concludes with one of the most downright statements of the justice of Providence in English literature:

All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;  
 All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see;  
 All Discord, Harmony, not understood;  
 All partial Evil, universal Good:  
 And, spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,  
 One truth is clear, "Whatever is, is right."

(289-294)

Mack observes in a note to this passage that its second line is "the theme of Boethius's *De cons. phil.*" More properly, it forms a part of the thematic structure of that work, just as it is a part of the argument stated in Pope's lines. The idea appears specifically in 5. pr. 1.18ff.:

"Si quidem," inquit, "aliquis euentum temerario motu nullaque casuarum conexione productum casum esse definiat, nihil omnino casum esse confirmo et praeter subiectae rei significationem inanem prorsus uocem esse decerno. Quis enim coercente in ordinem cuncta deo locus esse ullus temeritati reliquus potest? . . . Quotiens," ait, "aliquid cuiuspian rei gratia geritur aliudque quibusdam de causis quam quod intendebatur obtingit, casus uocatur, ut si quis colendi agri causa fodiens humum defossi auri pondus inueniat. Hoc igitur fortuito quidem creditur accidisse, uerum non de nihilo est; nam proprias causas habet quarum improuisus inopinatusque concursus casum uidetur operatus."

The harmony of creation is emphasized in 2. met. 8. Again, the idea that "partial evil" is actually good is stated in terms of Fortune in 4. pr. 7.2-3: "Omnem . . . bonam prorsus esse fortunam." Although Lady Philosophy does not say in so many words, "Whatever is, is right," she says something very similar (4. pr. 6.131ff.): "Hic igitur quidquid citra spem videas geri, rebus quidem rectus ordo est, opinioni uero tuae peruersa confusio." Moreover, she denies the possibility of evil (3. pr. 12.80ff.): "Malum igitur . . . nihil est, cum id facere ille non possit, qui nihil non potest."

The second epistle of Pope's *Essay* yields no very striking parallels with the *De consolatione philosophiae*. Epistle 3, however, contains a description of the "chain of Love" (ll. 7ff.) which, as Mack indicates in his note, has as one of its antecedents *De cons.* 2. met. 8. Again, both Boethius (2. met. 5) and Pope (ll. 147ff.) describe the Golden Age, but with rather different purposes in mind. In Epistle 4, after explaining that happiness does not lie "in Externals," Pope continues,

Fortune her gifts may variously dispose,  
 And these be happy call'd, unhappy those;

But Heav'n's just balance equal will appear,  
 While those are plac'd in Hope, and these in Fear;  
 Not present good or ill, the joy or curse,  
 But future views of better, or of worse.  
 Oh sons of earth! attempt ye still to rise,  
 By mountains piled on mountains, to the skies?

(67-74)

The idea that fortune creates hope and fear appears in the last meter of the first book of the *De consolatione*, ll. 20-28:

Tu quoque si uis  
 Lumine claro  
 Cernere uerum,  
 Tramite recto  
 Carpere callem,  
 Gaudia pelle,  
 Pelle timorem  
 Spemque fugato  
 Nec dolor adsit.

Lady Philosophy here admonishes her pupil to avoid hope and fear based on externals. She had said earlier (1. met. 4.15-18),

At quisquis trepidus pauet uel optat,  
 Quod non sit stabilis suiue iuris,  
 Abiecit clipeum locoque motus  
 Nectit qua ualeat trahi catenam.

Although Pope's initial point about the equalizing effects of hope and fear is not in Boethius, his admonition to the "sons of earth" makes essentially the same point that Boethius does. The "sons of earth" are, of course, those who set their hearts on earthly things and hope to achieve happiness from them. They need to learn, as Boethius says (4. met. 7.34-35) "superata tellus / sidera donat." Mack calls attention to a parallel between Pope's figure and the language of 2. pr. 6.1: "Quid autem de dignitatibus potentiaque disseram quae uos uerae dignitatis ac potestatis inscii caelo exaequatis?"<sup>8</sup>

Pope continues by asserting that the real pleasures of reason and the senses lie in "Health, Peace, and Competence," which are founded on virtue. The gifts of Fortune may fall either to the virtuous or to the vicious, but they cannot make the vicious happy:

The good or bad the gifts of Fortune gain,  
 But these less taste them, as they the worse obtain.

Say, in pursuit of profit or delight,  
 Who risk the most, that take wrong means, or right?  
 Of Vice or Virtue, whether blest or curst,  
 Which meets contempt, or which compassion first?  
 Count all th'advantage prosp'rous Vice attains,  
 'Tis but what Virtue flies from and disdains.

(83-90)

The idea that the wicked "take wrong means" in their pursuit of happiness and gain only that which the virtuous "disdain" is explained at length in *De cons.* 3. pr. 2 and 4. pr. 2. The latter passage concludes with the following observation concerning the wicked: "Faciunt enim quaelibet, dum per ea quibus delectantur id bonum quod disiderant se adepturos putant; sed minime adipiscuntur, quoniam ad beatitudinem probra non veniunt." They are truly happy, Pope says, who see and follow the scheme of Providence:

Oh blind to truth, and God's whole scheme below,  
 Who fancy Bliss to Vice, to Virtue Woe!  
 Who sees and follows that great scheme the best,  
 Best knows the blessing, and will most be blest:

It is clearly Lady Philosophy's desire to show her pupil this "great scheme" so that he may find happiness in following it.

As for worldly advantages, Pope explains at length that wealth, honors, titles, birth, greatness, fame, and superior parts do not bring true happiness. The discussion very roughly parallels that in *De cons.* 3, where the emptiness of a similar series of advantages is described. Specific arguments are sometimes similar as well. Pope's treatment of honors concludes,

Worth makes the man, and want of it, the fellow;  
 The rest is all but leather or prunella.

(203-204)

We shall look in vain for "leather or prunella" in Boethius, but in 3. met. 4 we learn that the costume of high office may adorn the wicked:

Quamuis se Tyrio superbus ostro  
 Comeret et niueis lapillis,  
 Inuisus tamen omnibus uigebat  
 Luxuriae Nero saeuientis.  
 Sed quondam dabat improbus uerendis  
 Patribus indecores curules.

Quis illos igitur putet beatos  
 Quos miseri tribuunt honores?

Boethius had also said (3. pr. 4.18ff.) that worth makes the man: "Inest enim dignitas propria uirtuti, quam protinus in eos quibus fuerit adiuncta transfundit." With reference to titles, Pope expresses some doubts about purity of lineage in noble families, but he concludes,

What can ennoble sots, or slaves, or cowards?  
 Alas! not all the blood of all the Howards.

(215-216)

In other words, nobility lies in worth rather than in ancestry, an idea vividly expressed in *De cons.* 3. pr. 6, and met. 6. Summing up, Pope says,

Bring then these blessings to a strict account,  
 Make fair deductions, see to what they mount.  
 How much of other each is sure to cost;  
 How each for other oft is wholly lost . . .

(269-272)

The idea that the pursuit of one false good can be made only at the expense of others appears in *De cons.* 3. pr. 9.50ff.:

"Qui diuitias," inquit, "petit penuriae fuga, de potentia nihil laborat, uilis obscurusque esse mauult, multas etiam sibi naturales quoque subtrahit uoluptates, ne pecuniam quam parauit amittat. Sed hoc modo ne sufficientia quidem contingit ei quem ualentia deserit, quem molestia pungit, quem uilitas abicit, quem recondit obscuritas. Qui uero solum posse desiderat, profligat opes, despicit uoluptates, honoremque potentia carentem gloriam quoque nihili pendit. Sed hunc quoque quam multa deficient uides. Fit enim ut aliquando necessariis egeat, ut anxietatibus mordeatur cumque haec depellere nequeat, etiam id quod maxime petebat potens esse desistat. Similiter ratiocinari de honoribus, gloria, uoluptatibus licet."

Finally, the principle with which Pope concludes, "Virtue alone is Happiness below," is explained at length in *De cons.* 4. pr. 3.

In general, Pope's arguments are not quite so rigorous as those of Boethius, perhaps because he could expect his audience to fill in for him from the stock of commonplace Christian thought. He does not push their implications quite so far either, except, perhaps in the concluding lines of the first Epistle. Whether or not he actually had the *De*

*consolatione* in mind when he wrote his *Essay* would be difficult to decide. The ideas and the figurative language of Boethius had been widely imitated for centuries at the time Pope wrote, so that he might easily have found both elsewhere. Nevertheless, the early translation of the meter does indicate that Boethius may have had a formative influence on Pope's thought. The fact that there are certain similarities between the *De consolatione philosophiae* and *The Essay on Man*, moreover, reinforces the conclusion long since established by students of Pope that the content of the *Essay* is essentially traditional.