The Early Christian Response to Platonist Poetics

Boethius, Prudentius, and the *Poeta Theologus*

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13.1. INTRODUCTION

The literary tradition associated with Boethius's *consolatio philosophiae* is well known and crucial to Western literary history. As readers, we envision Boethius sitting in his cell, contemplating the injustice of his suffering and impending death.[1] *Philosophia* ("Lady Philosophy") comes to him to furnish a therapeutic cure that will change his perspective, bring him peace of mind and strength to face a fate that he does not control.[2] In the *consolatio*, Boethius revisits the age-old quarrel between philosophy (for Christians, theology) and poetry by drawing upon discrete forms of prose and poetry and by adopting the content of the ancient philosophical and poetic traditions—and even Christian traditions.[3] Poetry, the source of lies, stands side by side with its opposite, philosophy, the way of truth.[4]

I argue that Boethius offers a solution to the traditional quarrel between philosophy and poetry, which in the fourth-through-sixth-century Latin West had resulted in denying poetry's claims to truth, conferring upon poetry

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1. On Boethius's life and imprisonment, see Helleman 2009: 96; Chadwick 1981: 48–56; Marenbon 2003: 7–10. For a summary of recent Boethian interpretation, see Helleman 2009: 110–24. Text and translations of Boethius are from Stewart, Rand, and Tester 1918 with changes; for Prudentius, see Thomson 1949 with changes.

2. See Helleman 2009: 110 for a summary of scholarship on the identity of *Philosophia*.

3. Mohrmann 1976: 54–61 argues that even though Boethius aims for "neutrality," the language of *consolatio* has Christian features concerning piety and the liturgy, i.e., Christian worship and ritual practice.

4. For prose forms the *consolatio* recalls the philosophical dialogue and theological treatise; for forms of poetry, elegy, lyric, and others. Boethius is steeped in the philosophical traditions of Plato and Aristotle (not to mention the Hellenistic schools, which may be represented by those who have torn *Philosophia*'s cloak, *cons.* 1.p1.22–5). He is also a sophisticated inheritor of Roman poetic tradition, including Vergil (Shanzer 2009: 229), Lucretius, and Horace (O'Daly 1991: 42, 49). Klingner 1966 and Courcelle 1967 are both excellent on Boethius's sources and influences. Donato 2013: ch. 4 argues that Boethius's attitudes toward philosophy in his writings take their cue from the Neoplatonists Iamblichus and Proclus, who understood philosophy as improvable and an important step to a superior form of knowledge.

consequently a secondary intellectual status[5] but also a challenge to reinvent itself. Moreover, from a literary and historical perspective, Boethius's use of poetry in the *consolatio* helps to clarify the poetics of early Christian poets, such as Prudentius. A renewed version of the old quarrel, articulated anew as a quarrel between poetry and theology, became fundamental to the conception of literature. By the end of the fourth century, patristic works sanctioned a devastating, Platonist critique of poetry, arguing that most poetry is divorced from truth and that the sole pleasure and truth of poetry therefore ought to subsist in chanting and singing hymns to God. For the church and its most eminent thinkers, poetry should avoid irrelevant allegories and metaphors and be committed to communicating doctrine directly to the masses. Theological and doctrinal prose had the upper hand, as it were, with poetry condemned to a subordinate position in the intellectual/religious debates of the day.[6] However, poetry did play a unique role in transmitting stories and doctrine and developing innovative forms. Christian poets did not merely conform to patristic strictures but engaged in a sustained project of reimagining poetry's use and purpose. Nevertheless, it remains the case that for the first three centuries of Latin Christian poetry, a revival of the opposition between prose and poetry obtained to the disadvantage of poetry as a cultural touchstone.

Given the results of the opposition between philosophy/theology and poetry, Prudentius and other early Christian poets, who wrote non-liturgical poetry, faced a profound problem of poetics: what was the function of poetry and what cultural role did it play? More specifically, what would be a response to the patristic, Platonist critique of poetry? Boethius's *consolatio* gives a comprehensive response, indications of which are also found in the work of Prudentius.[7] It is through the interaction of poetry and philosophy in the *consolatio* that Boethius achieves a rapprochement between the two, a new poetics that paved the way for the medieval *theologus poeta*. Long before Petrarch pronounced "theology is poetry that is from God,"[8] early Christian poets, like Boethius (and Prudentius as well), represent the beginning of a literary historical process in which Christian poets from Late Antiquity through Petrarch and right up to

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5. Mastrangelo 2009: 313–20. See Ware in this volume on how the practitioners of prose panegyric attempted to appropriate and supersede poetry as a genre.

6. Mastrangelo 2009: 311; Lerer 1985: 3–4.

7. I am not arguing for a formal influence of Prudentius on Boethius, though there is some evidence (e.g., Klingner 1966: 54–5). Rather, Prudentius and Boethius are part of a literary historical trajectory, which originates in their attitudes toward poetry and philosophy, i.e., in their poetics.

8. *Le familiari*, 10,4 dicam theologiam poeticam esse de Deo; See Curtius 1990: 226. For Petrarch, "theology," whether in the form of prose or verse, is "poetry."

Milton settle the old argument between philosophy/theology and poetry and restore poetry's cultural and intellectual status.

In what follows I begin by sketching the nature of the Platonist-patristic critique of poetry that dominated the early Christian literary landscape. Secondly, I argue that Boethius responds to this critique in three ways: 1) by merging poetic and philosophical discourses; 2) by renewing poetry's claims to truth; and 3) by developing a dualist poetics in which poetry shares in unifying the human and the divine. Throughout, I suggest that the work of Prudentius reflects certain aspects of the Boethian response, especially when compared to other poets of the period. The works of Boethius and Prudentius reflect a rapprochement between the *poeta* and the *theologus*, a development that Dante, Petrarch, and Milton would take for granted.

13.2. The Platonist/Patristic Critique of Poetry

In the *Republic* and *Ion*, Plato nearly eliminates poetry's educational and cultural functions because of its inability to transmit knowledge and virtue to its readers. On this view, not only is poetry, as practiced in the Greek tradition, divorced from truth, it can shape bad character in its audience. Thus, Plato banishes poets from his ideal city, only allowing them to stay if they produce hymns to gods and virtuous men.[9] While classical and Hellenistic literary criticism followed upon this provocative thesis, it is not until the Roman Empire of Constantine and thereafter that this Platonist vision of poetry was to a certain degree enacted.

For early Christian poets, a patristic version of this doctrine became a central condition of artistic production.[10] Church fathers such as Lactantius, Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome at different times either ignore or criticize (non-liturgical) Christian poetry. Their attitudes toward pagan poetry are clear: It is full of lies and is incapable of expressing truth. On the ground, this attitude translated into a lukewarm reception (and lack of recognition) of early Christian poetry by the church fathers. On the other hand, the patristic version of the Platonist view of poetry furnished a set of constraints that helped usher in, for example, the development of the genre of hymns in Ambrose and the experiment with pagan poetic forms in Prudentius and Paulinus of Nola, all the while transmitting Christian doctrinal content.

9. The bibliography is daunting on Plato's treatment of the poets. Moravcsik and Temko 1982 is still a good place to start. See also Asmis 1992.

10. The patristic critique of pagan poetic tradition developed a loose set of patristic conventions of poetic practice for Christian poetry. See Evenpoel 1993: 44–8, Mastrangelo 2009: 316–24, and Mastrangelo 2016. I wish to focus on specific Platonist-patristic themes to which the poetics of Prudentius and Boethius answers.

Lactantius, writing during the apologetic phase of early Christianity, is willing to give pagan poets credit for being close to the truth (*inst.* 1.5.11–14) and containing certain truths like the remoteness of justice in human affairs (*inst.* 5.5.1–2) and even resurrection (*inst.* 7.22.1–4). He laments that Orpheus, Vergil, and Ovid never fully express truth (*inst.* 1.5.14). Homer deals in falsities because, as Lactantius says at *inst.* 1.5.8, "he wrote on a human rather than a divine level." Even though he rationalizes the views of the pagan poets (see also *inst.* 1.11.30; 2.10.12), Lactantius plants the seeds in his patristic descendants of the rejection of pagan poets precisely because of their problem with telling the truth according to Christian doctrine: "Philosophy, oratory, and poetry are all pernicious for the ease with which they enslave incautious souls in beguiling prose and nice modulations of poetical flow. They are honey, hiding poison" (*inst.* 5.1.10).[11]

Lactantius wrote before Christian poetry constituted a body of work. However, Augustine, who could have commented on many Christian poetic texts, does so rarely, and when he does make a comment, it is only on liturgical works such as the *psalms* or Ambrose's *hymns*.[12] He begins from Lactantius's critique of the pagan poets, and like his contemporary, Jerome, he goes much further: *non audiendi sunt errores gentilium superstitionum* ("For we must not listen to the fictions of pagan superstitions," AUG. *doctr. christ.* 2.16.26–2.17.27). When not reading scripture, Augustine reads exclusively patristic authors,[13] and by the time of *City of God*, he has repudiated Vergil as a liar and discredited epic as source of (national) identity.[14]

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11. *Nam et in hoc philosophi et oratores et poetae perniciosi sunt, quod incautos animos facile inretire possunt suavitate sermonis at carminum dulci modulation currentium* [*mella sunt haec venena tegentia*]. But Lactantius seems to have left the door open for a new kind of non-liturgical Christian poetry when he says that no poem is a "total fiction"; that is, poems harbour truths that are hidden and more difficult to find (*inst.* 1.11.30; 1.9.8–10; 1.11.23–5, 30, 36; 1.19.5; 1.21.44). All English translations of Lactantius are taken from Bowen and Garnsey 2003.

12. Westra 2007: 12 points out that Augustine offers no substantive comment on non-liturgical poetry as practiced by his contemporaries (see Roberts in this volume, on the importance of a liturgical purpose for Christian poetry.) E.g., the first explicit reference we have to Prudentius is Cassian in 426, and both Augustine and Jerome ignore him. Augustine does express admiration for Ambrose's hymn *deus creator omnium* (*conf.* 9.12.32; 10.35.52; 11.27.35). But could Augustine have *not* read an author like Prudentius? We know that Prudentian manuscripts show up early and often; and he is cited throughout the fifth century by people like Paulinus of Nola, Cassian, Claudius Marius Victor, Sedulius, and others. These citations cover Gaul to Greece, but Africa appears to lack this sort of Prudentian presence until Dracontius. *Civ.* 19.10 has been cited occasionally as a reference to the praise of peace in the *Psychomachia*. The philological evidence appears to be razor thin.

13. AUG. *doctr. christ.* 2.40.61; 4.5.8; 4.124.30; 4.21.45–8.

14. At *serm.* 105.7.10, Augustine attacks Vergil, the spokesman for all pagan Roman culture, as a liar. MacCormack 1998: 190, says: "This mode of interpretation reduced the subtle mingling of myth and history and of divine and human action that characterized epic poetry to a straightforward contrast of truth and invention." See also Mastrangelo 2009: 318–19.

Augustine stridently dismisses pagan poetry as worthless, especially when poetry views itself as a form of prophecy or theology. At *civ.* 6.5, he criticizes Varro's Platonist-inspired views on theological expression because he did not go far enough. Varro's three categories of theology form the basis of this critique: 1) the mythical, which "is especially used by the poets," 2) the physical (natural), "which the philosophers use," and 3) the civic, "which the people use." The bishop dismisses the first and third categories because they have poetry in common (the civil supports theatre that portrays the divine in unacceptable ways, *conf.* 2.24 and 4.27); poetry is "false, vile, and unworthy." While not giving an endorsement to physical or natural theology as practiced by philosophers, he does not criticize it as he does the other two. For Augustine, poetry is divorced from theology, at least poetry as traditionally practiced in Graeco-Roman culture. In Augustine's Christian (rhetorical) aesthetic, the pagan allegorical tradition of poets as theologians is unacceptable because of "the perception of poets as rivals to the Old Testament prophets."[15] The idea of poets as theologians places poetry as a textual rival to the scriptures.[16] Poetry is an activity limited to the human sphere, with little, if any, connection to the divine. Similar to Lactantius, Augustine seizes upon Hesiod's account of the Muses, whom he understands as human beings that became immortal by human invention (*doctr. christ.* 2.18.26–2.17.27). Poetry as a purely human production lacks a connection to the divine and is thus beyond the defence of "reasonable lies."

Augustine's silence on early Christian poets and his rejection of poetry as reflective of the divine compel the conclusion that non-liturgical poetry does *not* count as a legitimate reading or interpretation of the Bible.[17]Hence, a severe Platonist aesthetic results in which even poetry that celebrates God and proper theological and moral doctrines remains marginal because the moment the practice of poetry is severed from its divine connection and function of cultural and cosmic interpreter, it has no business concerning itself with the interpretation of scripture, a sacred text that is divine in origin and a guide for life. Thus Augustine moves away from pagan *and* Christian poets (for related but different reasons) to Ambrose, Cyprian, the scriptures, and other church fathers (*doctr. christ.* 2.40.61; 4.5.8; 4.14.30; 4.21.45–8). Combined with his explicit suspicion of

15. Westra 2007: 17. Augustine rejected poetry's association with hierophants, prophets, or others types of mediators of divine truth.
16. Stock 1996: 53 observes that for Augustine, spiritual progress is linked to the reading and interpretation of biblical texts.
17. See Clark in this volume for Augustine's (Platonist) view of a Christian poetics.

poetic pleasure,[18] which flows from the senses and emotions, Augustine constructs a Platonist aesthetic that separated the *poeta* from the *theologus* and poetry from (biblical) interpretation.[19]

Augustine is a prominent example in patristic literature wherein Platonist attitudes, such as poetry's fraudulent representation of the divine and its separation from prophetic knowledge, elicited reactions in the Christian poetry from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance.[20] Ambrose disparages both pagan poets and philosophers (Aristotle, in particular) by accusing them of having the same incorrect idea of God because both follow the same poetic *fabulae: et quomodo ipsi excludunt quos sequuntur poetas?* "And how is it that they [philosophers] reject the poets whom they follow?" (AMBR. *off.* 1.50). Jerome, who at one point in his life claims that he hadn't touched a pagan text in fifteen years (*in Gal.* 3), asserts the divorce of pagan poetry from things divine by criticizing clergy: "priests of God who slight the Gospels and the prophets, reading comedies, reciting love passages from bucolic verse, cherishing Vergil" (HIER. *epist.* 21,9).[21] One aspect of this legacy, crystallized in Augustine's *Confessions*—a prose work with poetic

18. See Westra 2007: 14. Augustine does accept certain kinds of cognitive pleasure like the contemplation of God. However, such an activity is best reserved for exegesis and theology, found in his more populist sermons and more scholarly treatises. As Westra 2007: 21 concludes, "the pleasurable element of Christian literature becomes subordinated to the didactic purposes of prose preaching."

19. Clark (432–8) in this volume rehearses Augustine's "Platonist objections to poetry." Clark in the same essay discusses Augustine's rejection of poetry's complicated vocabulary, syntax, and grammar as necessary in order to communicate with common people. A poem that is characterized by *sermo humilis* is best. Prudentius, on the other hand, was after an educated audience (Clark 444–5)

20. The separation of poetry from knowledge of or inspiration from the divine is apparent in both patristic literature and early Christian poetry. For example, the reputed teacher of Lactantius, Arnobius, who wrote his *adversus nationes* around the turn of the fourth century, denies that divine inspiration exists for the arts and similar crafts (*nat.* 2.19). At *nat.* 1.19, Arnobius recycles the argument of Plato's *Republic*, perhaps as filtered through Cicero (CIC. *nat. deor.* 1.16.42), in which poets' representation of the gods is criticized (cf. *nat.* 3.11 on poets and philosophers telling false stories about the gods and 4.32–6 on poets and dramatists). Another Christian author, the apocalyptic poet Commodianus (third century), discredits pagan poets who are seen as prophets and misrepresent the divine, *per vates historicae confictae* (*instr.* 6.15; see also 17.1). Commodianus sees himself as a *perdoctus* poet who is teaching the ignorant through reading of sacred texts (*instr.* 8.10–12, *accedite legis <codicem> et di<s>cete verum*—cf. Augustine's *tolle lege!*) Commodianus expresses the Platonist approach, in which the didactic and educative function of poetry determines what it can be used for (*disce Deum, stulte, qui vult te inmortalem adesse, instr.* 29,12; *lex docet . . . , instr.* 29,14).

21. Jerome's full critique of pagan poetry is explicitly Platonist. At *ep.* 21.4, he discusses further how this poetry penetrates the soul, causing a lack of truth, justice, and a character bereft of virtue (cf. *ep.* 22.30.4). His most famous statement against pagan literature at *ep.* 22.29.7 exploits 1 Cor. 8:10 and dismisses the two greatest pagan Latin poets: "What has Horace to do with the Psalter, Vergil with the Gospels, Cicero with Paul?" Notice that Jerome distinguishes between pagan poetry and liturgical poetry, Horace versus the Psalter. Also, Vergil is juxtaposed with the Gospels, the primary identity-forming text of Christianity. Poetry is of no use when put against these texts. Cicero and Paul are the spokesmen, apologists, and doctrinal sources of pagan Roman and Christian thought, respectively.

sensibilities, resulted in the discouragement of a theological poetry in favour of a poetry that highlights, for instance, an individual, spiritual journey, from earthly pleasures to heavenly contemplation.[22] Direct communication of the poet and, by extension, the reader with God would become a function of early Christian poetry.

Other personages from the early church, some of whom were poets, reflected the institutional and political role of the Platonist critique of reading and writing poetry. By the time of Avitus of Vienne (d. 517 CE), the freedom to experiment with form and style (meter, diction, tropes), a hallmark of fourth-century poetry, had come into question. In the dedicatory letter to his *de spiritalis historiae gestis* (507 CE), he says:

> However shrewd and learned a man may be, if in the representation of his Christian belief he follows the law of faith no less than the law of meter, he can hardly be a proper poet, since the seriousness of his subject requires that the freedom to lie . . . be utterly banished. For in the composition of a secular poetry the more artistically, or rather . . . the more improperly a man has introduced falsehoods, the more skilled he is acclaimed to be.[23]

Michael Roberts has described Avitus as taking an "unusually rigid" stance when compared to a poet like Dracontius, who engages in the tropes of metonymy or the mythological language of *tonans* for God.[24] Further, when posing the question of the source of Avitus's so-called rigidity, Roberts makes the point that he was a bishop, which added to his own restrictive, Platonist sense of what poetry could be.[25] In the *de virginitate* (275, 9–12, Peiper 1886) Avitus goes further by saying that only prose is appropriate for a bishop such as himself.[26]

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22. Warner 2005: 2–5 observes that Petrarch was a main inheritor of this approach to poetry, but there is still the question of whether Augustine was the main or only purveyor of allegorical epic (2, 7) to Petrarch and other medieval and Renaissance poets.

23. Translation by Roberts 1980. The Latin text is as follows: *Quamquam quilibet acer ille doctusque sit, si religionis propositae stilum non minus fidei quam metri lege servavit, vix aptus esse poemati queat; quippe cum licentia mentiendi . . . satis procul a causarum serietate pellenda sit. In saeculari namque versuum opera condendo tanto quis peritior appelatur, quanto elegantius, immo . . . ineptius falsa texuerit.* Avitus cleverly discredits the fundamentally literary language of the *doctus poeta*; e.g., *doctus, elegantius, texuerit.* Other poets were endeavouring to package Christian doctrine in the more sophisticated pagan forms, but the purpose of this innovative and experimental work was to create, in the words of Jerome, a Christian literature *de scripturis sanctis.* See Vessey 2007: 33, 47.

24. Roberts 1980: 406.

25. Roberts 1980: 406 cites Avitus 202, 10–12 (Peiper), which shows the bishop rejecting the reading of pagan poetry because he is a member of the clergy.

26. Roberts 1980: 407 overstates when he says that "Avitus, alone of the Biblical poets of Late Antiquity, occupied an important position in the ecclesiastical hierarchy." While Avitus may have held a particularly powerful position in the church, the emphasis should be that Christian poets and other influential critiques of poetry were connected closely to the government and to the church. E.g., Juvencus

Avitus was not the only voice that re-energizes this overtly church-based Platonist critique. By the fifth century, Hilary of Arles is embarrassed that he had written poetry inspired by pagan poets.[27] Pierre Riché has gone as far as saying that in Gaul, the students of rhetors, who were under episcopal orders, had to account for the incompatibility between sacred and profane cultures.[28] Sidonius Apollinaris, who wrote masses and hymns, admits that he was not mindful enough of his profession as bishop (*epist.* 4.12) and recognizes that the reputation of a poet could stain the dignity of a member of the clergy (*clerici ne quid maculet rigorem fama poeta, epist.* 9.16).[29] One generation later, Ennodius, bishop of Ticinum, has a similar reaction to Sidonius, saying that his clerical status compels him to pursue simple (Christian) doctrine. He exclaims to his protégé, the poet Arator, that he hates the liberal arts, which included poetry (ENNOD. *epist.* 2.6 and 9.1).[30] Poets and rhetoricians are liars, which he cannot be obliged to follow (*a vera sapientia mentitam secutus abcesseram,* "Having followed lies I had gone away from the path of true wisdom," ENNOD. *euch. opusc.* 5). Finally, in the fifth century, church documents themselves reinforced this attitude that its clerics reject their Roman pagan literary inheritance, even instituting a probationary period for a year.[31] In fact, this impasse furnished a serious test of clerics ability to deal with the early Christian problem of education. This Platonist tension, in which an education program must be purged of its malevolent influences, could be resolved only by an intellectual conversion on the part of cleric-poets like Avitus, Sidonius, and others.

In the Rule of Benedict, written by Benedict of Nursia in the mid-sixth century, the monastic contribution to educational programming is

is said to have been a priest. Paulinus of Nola was a high-ranking senator and provincial governor as well as a presbyter (393 CE) and bishop of Nola (409 CE). Sedulius, who spent his early life studying pagan literature, becomes a priest, according to Isidore of Seville. Orientius appears to have been the bishop of Auch in the early fifth century. Ennodius of Arles (d. 534 CE) was bishop of Ticinum; and his protégé, Arator, who was a lawyer at the court of Ravenna, was a *subdiaconus* and entered the papal service. Sidonius (d. 485 CE) was prefect of Rome and bishop of Clermont. Both Augustine and Jerome, two of the most influential critics of poetry, held important positions in the church.

27. See Riché 1995: 83 for references.

28. Riché 1995: 83. Much of what follows in this paragraph is based on Riché 1995: 81–4.

29. See also SIDON. *epist.* 9.12.1: *Primum ab exordio religiosae professionis huic principaliter exercitio renuntiavi, quia nimirum facilitate posset accomodari, si me occupasset levitas versum. . . . Post mortem non opuscula sed opera pensanda.*

30. Cf. *epist.* 9.9, where Ennodius refuses to instruct his son in the liberal arts—in other words, the heritage of Graeco-Roman learning.

31. *Statuta ecclesiae antiqua* (sec. 13.5) says: *ut episcopus gentilium libros non legat . . .* ("so that the bishop not read the pagan books"). For the probationary period, see *Council of Sardique, PL* 56.407. Riché 1995: 84 says: "the cultured clergy felt the necessity to reject classical culture, but they did not resolve the problem despite council edicts."

manifest. Thus the reading list includes only prose: the New Testament, the Pentateuch, the church fathers, the *Lives of the Desert Fathers*, and Saint Basil. The *concilium vasense*, a clerical document from 529 CE outlining the responsibilities of priests asserts: "priests installed in the parish ... [should] ... bring up religiously, as good fathers, young readers" by teaching them psalmody, how to read sacred texts, and the Law of the Lord "in order to ensure the emergence of worthy successors"; and the *Toletana Synodus* (Second Council of Toledo) II.1 says that all children destined for the church should be taught in the church in the presence of a bishop.[32] By the sixth century, the church exerted nearly a total influence on education. Hymns and scripture constituted the reading list, all overseen by theologian authority figures—a scheme Plato could have only dreamed of in fifth- and fourth-century Athens.

Recent scholarship has confirmed that the period's environment for Christian poets was indeed challenging. Fontaine, for instance, has isolated two different but related factors: first, that after 406 CE the material destruction of civil war, invasions, the paralysis of public scholastic institutions, and the unintellectual forms of education of the German invaders damaged antique culture and the written word; and secondly, he argues that "Ciceronian culture" (i.e., the pagan inheritance, or *cultura animi*) undergoes a significant change. All cultural activity, including the "highest type," theology, exegesis, and literature, was integrated into a "specifically religious activity." Graeco-Roman culture "becomes a means toward a religious end which surpasses it: the personal encounter with God in the Holy scripture, which preserves His presence via His Word, and in the *vita communis* of a monastic or clerical community."[33] Christian doctrine and education as circumscribed by the monastic and clerical communities, the "philosopher kings," constitute the intellectual environment that Christian poets were working under.

Other modern scholars, such as R. Herzog and M. Vessey to different degrees, have commented on the reduction or displacement of poetry's interpretative function to biblical exegesis, which was being done authoritatively in prose by church fathers. When analyzing HIER. *epist.* 58,8–11, Herzog commented that "poetry, like every other genre, ha[d] forfeited its status as a

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32. Fontaine 2005: 743–4 cites these texts.

33. Fontaine 2005: 737. See also Vessey 2007: 33 on the use of pagan poetry and prose as a means for exegesis and the view of Herzog 1975: 167–78 that Jerome was indifferent to poetry, contra Curtius who saw the saint as a promoter of Christian poetry. Vessey stakes out the middle ground by seeing in Jerome "a scripturally oriented poetics" (34). Both Vessey and Herzog are in line with the picture I am giving in this chapter.

distinct field of literary reception." In summing up Paulinus of Nola's con-
tribution to literary history, Vessey concluded that he had "lent his hand to
one of the most laborious acts in European literary history: the displace-
ment of Roman poetry by biblical exegetical prose." Vessey's verdict is similar
on Jerome's Christian *litteratus*, whose works should be "in prose on Holy
scripture ... distinct from all previous poetry-as-versification, 'pagan' or
Christian."[34]

Early Christian poets composed their works under an aesthetic regime in
which exegesis of biblical texts and Christian doctrine was not seen as a distin-
guishing mark. Even with Herzog's pronouncement that a significant portion
of early Christian poetry is exegetical,[35] the conventional wisdom has been that
early Christian poetry was not innovative and nuanced, nor did it even achieve
complete arguments, in the interpretation of biblical texts. For that, patristic
treatises and sermons have been the gold standard. However, at different stages
of the development of Christian poetry in the third to sixth centuries, one can
indeed discern an engagement to varying degrees with the *poeta theologus* func-
tion. Green has recently sketched how the biblical epics by Juvencus, Sedulius,
and Arator, for example, engage in a spectrum of exegesis, ranging from a
default exegesis by the choice of biblical references to sophisticated commen-
tary on biblical passages and stories.[36] For all the creativity in the exegesis of
Sedulius and Arator, Curtius's conclusion continues to rankle: namely, that early
Christian poetry's connection to Graeco-Roman tradition "falsifies" the mean-
ing of scripture.[37] This state of affairs presented a challenge to Latin Christian
poets of the third through the sixth centuries. Moreover, it also highlights the
idea that the reception of early Christian Latin poetry before the early modern
era ignores its theological efforts, or in the modern era, it is received as contain-
ing second-rate theology. Boethius's *consolatio* responds by arguing that poetry
does not function like philosophical/theological prose, but nevertheless it is
necessary in the quest for divine truth and for an understanding of the human
predicament.

34. Both quotations are from Vessey 2007: 48 and 47, respectively.

35. See Charlet 1988: 82–4.

36. Green 2006, esp. 298–9, in the sections entitled "Exegesis" of the biblical poets Juvencas, Sedulius,
and Arator, sums up this progressivist picture of the three poets. Green at 367 discusses Petrarch's nega-
tive judgement (*ecl.* 10. 311–26) of these biblical poets, as well as Prudentius, as having "rich material" but
"poor style." However, Petrarch's critique goes further than mere style. He denies to them a connection
to the Muses and a lack of quality; while he ascribes to them the metaphor of tired oxen and the pejora-
tive "weak voice." Early Christian poetry has suffered in its reception from a secondary status as a poor
imitator of scripture.

37. Curtius 1990 461–2, referenced by Green 2006: 384.

13.3. THE MERGING OF POETIC
AND PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSES

Boethius makes explicit comments concerning the status of poetry throughout the *consolatio*. At 1.p1.39–41 Lady Philosophy drives away the *poeticas musas* from the prisoner's bedside. The distinction between traditional poetry and philosophy is clear and raw. 1m.1 is an expression of the prisoner's highly emotional state, an elegy for his condition: he is friendless, old, and undergoing the worst fortune he has experienced. As she expels the "literary" Muses, *Philosophia* boasts that her own muses (*meisque musis*) will restore the prisoner to health (1.p1.40–1). Finally, she wonders how such an exemplary person, nurtured by the Eleatic and Academic schools of philosophy, could be reduced to such irrational, emotional confusion. Her intervention is programmatic in terms of the role that Platonist views of poetry play in defining the distinction between literary poetry and philosophical poetry operative at this early stage of Boethius's work.

This generic distinction is usually understood as turning on emotional versus rational discourse. The first example of what rational, poetic discourse would look like is 1.m2, in which *Philosophia* complains, similarly to Boethius, that he used to study the causes of things (*naturae varias . . . causas*). The Greek naturalists (Thales, Empedocles, et al.) were his models, as they were Plato's, for finding answers to broad metaphysical questions. Rational and empirical methods used to satisfy the prisoner. But no longer does the light of his mind (*mentis*) provide answers. Early in *Philosophia*'s treatment of the topic, poetry appears to be useful only for expressing extreme emotion (even by *Philosophia*), but also that real health is achievable only through philosophical poetry or poetic philosophy. In the pejorative sense, poetry is a vehicle for expressing and eliciting extreme emotion; while in the ideal sense, poetry conveys knowledge of the universe. This understanding of poetry as either distracting emotion or a vehicle for pure reason (*affectuum* and *rationis, cons.* 1.p1.32–3) sums up the Platonist constraints on poetry that are established at the beginning of the *consolatio*.

Nevertheless, the first book of the *consolatio* provides a window into Boethius's modification of these Platonist strictures. At 1.m1, the Muses of poetry inspire Boethius to write emotional poetry, an elegy of sorts to express his grief over his situation. Poetry allows him to express his "tearful complaint" (*querimoniam lacrimabilem*, 1.p1.2). But as the first prose passage of book 1 proceeds, these Muses of poetry (*scenicas meretriculas*) are banished from the scene, but *poetry is not*. They are replaced by *Philosophia*, who carries a book and a sceptre. Philosophical poetry at this point of the *consolatio* appears to be the ideal, especially if we take into account 1.m.2's philosophical naturalism with its empirical and rational content. But by 1.m3 it is clear that this "ideal" is simply not enough

for Boethius the prisoner to break free of his malaise. In that poem we encounter a ten-line simile about *Philosophia* lifting the mist of lethargy from the prisoner's eyes. Indeed, poetry enhances and clarifies the picture of his condition. *Philosophia* is the *magistra virtutum* (1.m7) who comes down from her high seat (*supero cardine*, 1m.3.8). Poetic discourse participates in describing Boethius's condition and indicates the beginning of a solution: moral and spiritual therapy.

The *consolatio* begins with an elegiac poem expressing the poet's tragic situation and ends with a complicated argument in prose about divine foreknowledge and free will. It would seem that Boethius has indicated that philosophical argument has won the day and is the most serious medicine that will cure his spiritual ills. However, the last ten lines of the work (5.p6. 166–76) are a remarkable complication of this picture. The passage is a combination of an exhortation, a kind of prayer, and a direct emotional appeal that concludes by circling back to the idea of necessity, the abstract idea parsed in the previous 165 lines of prose. Those lines argue that human free will exists even though God has foreknowledge (the corollary of which implies the necessary occurrence of all events).[38] But at lines 166–7, Boethius anthropomorphizes God as a *spectator desuper* ("observer on high") who dispenses justice to the good and bad (169–70). Lines 170–2 proclaim the importance of "hopes and prayers" (*spes precesque* and *humiles preces in excelsa porrigite*, 171, 173–4), which are vital to avoiding vices and acquiring virtues (*aversamini igitur vitia, colite virtutes*, "turn away, then, from vices, and cultivate virtues," 172). The final sentence addresses readers directly,[39] challenging them to use their free will for good while being watched by a human-like God, the judge (*cum ante oculos agitis iudicis cuncta cernentis*, "when you act before the eyes of a judge who sees all," 175–6). Boethius returns to the kernel of 5.p6's compatibilist argument that while God's foreknowledge constitutes one part of necessity (e.g., *cunctorum praescius*, 167), free will to choose good or evil is the other part (*magna vobis est ... necessitas indicta probitatis*, "a great necessity is solemnly ordained for you to do good," 175).

Although the argument of the prose section and the work as a whole is summarized in concentrated fashion within lines 166–76, the tone is distinctively "unphilosophical." The emphasis on God the final judge, virtues and vices, prayer, and the necessity of free will, coupled with a direct address to readers, represents a compilation of poetic, rhetorical, and philosophical discourses. These discourses represent a concord between or a consolidation of the rational

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38. For the details of this difficult argument, see Marenbon 2003: 125–45.
39. Though note that the switch to the second person begins earlier at line 172 with "*aversamini ...*"

and the revelatory, the human and the divine, and finally, poetry and philosophy/theology.[40] For Boethius the author, the categories of "the poetic" and "the philosophical" have interpenetrated one another. Prayer, an anthropomorphic God, and direct address to the reader, mainstays of poetic texts, invade the end of the apparently "philosophical" 5.p6. In these verses and lines of prose, reason and revelation and philosophy/theology and poetry do not form such discreet categories. Moreover, scholars have shown that poetry is integral to the work, whether considered separately or together with the prose passages.[41] Allegory, metaphor, and emotional expression, rhetorical features of verse, can express a philosophical position, while analytical arguments are validated when packaged in a poetic trope, including allegory, metaphor, or exemplarity.[42] Also, scholars oversimplify when they assert that Boethius finds solace to his dire situation more in a reasoned philosophical approach than in the revelation of individual salvation.[43] The end of the *consolatio* alludes to the final judgment with God as arbiter; the virtue/vice language, which Boethius uses in several places,[44] is a fixture of Christian discourse from Tertullian onward and appears most famously in Prudentius's *Psychomachia*.

A central aspect of the *consolatio*'s originality lies in its presentation of various discourses for an ideologically neutral result. The presentation of pagan philosophical discourse does not conflict with Christian philosophy or doctrine.[45] Also, prose and poetry work together, employing rational argument,

40. These factors along with others have led some scholars to argue that the *consolatio* is unfinished. See O'Daly 1991: 28–9. *Philosophia*'s voice dominates 5.p6 and for most of book 5. She does not engage in much dialogue with Boethius, her attention taken up by weighty philosophical and theological topics such as chance, providence, necessity, and free will. A. Donato has pointed to Boethius's immersion in late antique Neoplatonism, exemplified by Iamblichus and Proclus, who saw no conflict between prayer and philosophical inquiry (190). Moreover, Donato argues, revelation and philosophical investigation of the divine can work together, as in the Neoplatonists and as stated in Boethius's works *de catholica* and *de trinitate*. See Donato 2013: 181–3.

41. Helleman 2009: 200 (also 122 n. 80 on Marenbon); Dronke 1994: 6; Curley 1987: 358–64, 366; Sweeney 2006: 4, 39; O'Daly 1991: 52 and more restrained at 147.

42. See Elsner and Formisano in this volume on how certain late antique poems use allegory to meditate on the role of the classical inheritance; also see Hernández Lobato in this volume (295–304) for the centrality of allegory in the work of Fulgentius; see also Mastrangelo 2008.

43. One of the major interpretive challenges regarding the *consolatio* has been readers' tendency to separate poetic and philosophic discourse into the rational or philosophical versus emotional or poetical. Jaroslav Pelikan 1971: 44 has expressed the problem in the following way: "This orthodox theologian in the hour of utmost need, found solace more in philosophical contemplation based on natural reason than on Christian revelation to which his theological works point." Pelikan's formulation of the question assumes a binary opposition between reason and revelation in the *consolation*.

44. There is a tradition of virtue/vice language in the pagan philosophical tradition going back to Plato *Rep.* 392.

45. This is a general thesis of Donato 2013 expressed at 165–6, among other places.

mythological exempla, and emotional reflection to find the cure for the suffering prisoner's soul. Boethius presents a mixed approach to the prisoner's spiritual and moral malaise. The result is that Boethius is stretching the possibilities and limits of form. Poetic form is a product of reception; that is, of the repurposing of the Graeco-Roman tradition and the new use to which it is put: merging with, consuming, and consumed by other discourses, including philosophical discourse. Thus Boethius constructs a poetics that not only opens up the interpretation of the *consolatio* but also fosters connections to early Christian poetry such as can be seen in the works of Prudentius.

In the *apotheosis*, Prudentius explicitly comments on poetry's status and role in late fourth-century Roman letters.[46] He makes three points, the last of which connects to Boethius's poetics. First Prudentius makes a more formal and literary historical argument at *apoth.* 234–7, suggesting that he is part of a literary tradition going back to the Old Testament prophets (as he indicates at *pe.* 10.838 and *tituli* 19 with mention of the ur-psalmist, David). The revelatory discourse of the prophets merges poetry, prophecy, and theology. Secondly, he asserts poetry's cultural centrality: at *apoth.* 268, knowledge is passed on by tradition (*quod traditur esse Deum*), for which poetry and poets are integral. He enriches this idea with the claim that God gave knowledge directly to humans through his revelation (*apoth.* 301). Thus knowledge is divinely given and disseminated through human means; that is, poetry and literature. Both points counter the patristic rejection of non-liturgical poetry's connection to the divine and prophecy.

Prudentius's third point follows on from the first two and is expressed in three passages. He identifies the three major intellectual traditions, Hebrew (Torah), Greek (philosophy), and Roman (both secular and Christian literature), that all proclaim the truth and significance of Christ (*apoth.* 376–80).[47] In another passage, he goes even further, imagining that all three traditions are represented on the head of the cross: *agnoscat Iudaea legens et Graecia norit / et venerata Deum percenseat aurea Roma* ("Let Judaea, as it reads, recognize, and let Greece know God, and let golden Rome, as she worships God, examine," *apoth.* 384–5). The verbs associated with each tradition are instructive: *agnoscat* expresses the recognition necessary for reading Christ's

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46. Prudentius discusses poetry elsewhere. See O'Daly 2016 with bibliography.

47. *Apoth.* 376–80: *nam quae iam littera Christum / non habet, aut quae non scriptorium armaria Christi / laude referta novis celebrant miracula libris? Hebraeus pangit stilus, Attica copia pangit, / pangit et Ausoniae facundia tertia linguae* ("For what literature does not contain Christ? What library is not filled with the praise of Christ and celebrates his wonderful works in new books? The Hebrew pen, the fullness of Athens, and third, the eloquent tongue of Italy are all composing them.")

story and doctrine throughout biblical history (in this section of the work Prudentius is attacking the Jews for their lack of recognition); *norit* emphasizes the epistemological approach of Greek philosophy through empirical and rational means; and *venerata* and *percenseat* represent Rome's Christian worship. All three areas of Mediterranean thought have not only proclaimed the legitimacy of Christ separately but appear inseparable when articulating proper Christian belief, doctrine, and practice. *Apoth.* 386–93 clinches the point that all traditions and genres of writing have proclaimed Christ and, what is more, that this function and role has been passed on to the poet Prudentius (*O nomen praedulce mihi!*).

For Prudentius, the fight amongst the three intellectual traditions is over. The *apotheosis* has got the trappings of a Christian apologetic work of the second or even third centuries. That is, it is a work which, at least on the face of it, is concerned with Christian identity in relation to the once dominant Hellenistic, Hebrew, and Roman traditions (for their political, intellectual, or religious authority).[48] An apologetic work demonstrates the value of the (Christian) ideology and refutes adversarial views.[49] However, by the end of the fourth century, the political, theological, and religious landscape had changed. Prudentius's tone is decidedly "post-apologetic." Christ's legitimacy can be confirmed by a combination of all three traditions, and for Prudentius, it is a straw man to assume that there are significant differences between them. This is not merely a syncretist view. When seen as a statement of poetics, it opens up a space for the merging of discourses, as seen in Boethius. For poetic composition and expression is fundamentally human and contains what can be said of the issues that both Prudentius and Boethius are tackling. At its best, poetry gives the human perspective on the divine, the world, and the universe. It is diachronic in its relationship to time, emotional in its orientation, and personal in its connection to the poet's real life situation. Philosophy and theology and their prose expressions are attempts to understand God's synchronic, universal perspective. They posit a God who sees all of time at once, presides over a rational universe, and is the judge of human action.

The *consolatio*'s poetics parallels Prudentius's view of poetry as the inheritance and expression of a grand metaphysical view; for example, a dualist (Platonist) distinction between human and divine perspectives on the world, traceable in the varieties of human discourse. This claim is shown in the use of

48. Rhee 2005: 21.
49. Rhee 2005: 24.

philosophical and poetic discourses in the *consolatio*. As we have seen, at the end of the *consolatio*, Boethius engages in poetic concerns in prosaic passages. The separation between prose and verse, theology and poetry, is ambiguous.[50] Finally, views on poetry's purposes and roles appear in both prose and verse passages.

13.4. The Renewal of Poetry's Claims to Truth

Regarding his use of poetry, Boethius constructs a poetics that responds to the fate of poetry as seen in the *Republic* and the banishment of the poetic Muses seen in the beginning of the *consolatio*. This dualist-based poetics develops from the moment the *poeticas musas* are told to leave. At *cons.* 1.m2, *Philosophia*'s first spoken poem is a throwback to metaphysical pre-Platonic poetry in which natural philosophy is presented in meter. At first glance, one might conclude that Boethius is constructing a poetics in which poetry is philosophical in content, thereby remooring poetry to truth in an analytical way.[51] Recall that in her first speech, *Philosophia* expels the Muses of elegiac and emotional poetry only to call upon her own muses (*meis . . . musis*, 1.p1.40). However, as the work proceeds, a more sophisticated poetics emerges. Boethius realigns or repurposes several tropes throughout the *consolatio*, making significant changes to tropes such as 1) the Muses, 2) the honeyed pill, and 3) the status of fictional stories (*fabulae*).[52]

In general, the reception of the Muses in Late Antiquity posits the Muses as a source of lies and misinformation.[53] This attitude, which occurs at the beginning of the *consolatio*, begins to be reversed, as already mentioned, in 1.p1, when *Philosophia* lays claim to having her own muses. But further signs of this re-evaluation of the muses occur later as well. At 3.m11.15–16, *Philosophia*

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50. Gualandri 1979: 85 had understood this ambiguity: "scomparsa ormai distinzione fra linguaggio poetico e linguaggio prosasticoche non sia quella pura e semplice del metro." On the merging of prose and poetry in Late Antiquity, see Hernández Lobato 2012: 466–70, whose term "intrasystemic hybridization" refers to the late antique practice of mixing, among other things, genres (e.g., the *Mosella* or Sidonius's *epistulae*) and aesthetic identities of poetry and prose.

51. Marenbon 2003: 162, Helleman 2009: 200, and O'Daly 1991: 52 have observed that the poetry in the *consolatio* is part of the search for truth.

52. In the context of this discussion, to repurpose is to reuse terms and concepts from literary tradition and history in new or different ways. On reuse, allusion, and intertextuality, see Kaufmann in this volume and Mastrangelo 2016.

53. See Walde 2006 on the ancient reception of the muses. For those who wished to disparage poetry, Hesiod's Muses at *theog.* 27–8 provided plenty of grist: "we know how to say lies that look like the truth, and whenever we wish, we can also speak the truth." However, poetry is still associated with truth. More to the point, for Boethius, it is language that is slippery, not the particular form of discourse.

says, *quod si Platonis musa personat verum / quod quisque discit immemor recordatur* ("If Plato's Muse rings true, what each person learns, though forgetting it, he remembers it"). *Philosophia* recalls Plato's theory of recollection in her own poem, a poem about the search for truth. The poem revises the Neoplatonic idea that the embodied soul is incapable of seeing truth. Rather, even when burdened by the forgetful weight of the body, the soul can see the light of truth through learning (*non omne . . . depulit lumen / . . . semen introrsum veri / quod excitatur . . . doctrina*, "[the body] has not removed all light; inside there is the seed of truth, which excites through learning," 3.m11.9–12). Boethius the author appropriates the figure of the muse, repurposing it for an individual's spiritual therapy. This is not merely a muse of philosophy, but a muse that "excites through learning." The engagement with ideas at the level of the emotions belongs to poetry (and rhetoric). *Philosophia*'s muse achieves this engagement through the use of poetry, which helps to align feelings with true doctrine. This constitutes a readjustment of Platonist conditions on how a person learns the truth. Perhaps here the influence of Aristotelian ethics or Iamblichan ritual on Boethius's Platonist foundation is palpable.

In a second example of the repurposing of a trope, Boethius innovates on the familiar Lucretian topos of the honeyed pill, in which poetry is the sweet outer layer that permits the sick individual to swallow the bitter inner kernel of beneficial ideas.[54] At 3.p1.1–9, Boethius expresses great enthusiasm. He has been revived by *sententiarum pondere* ("the weight of [*Philosophia*'s] arguments," 5) and the *canendi iucunditate* ("the delight of [*Philosophia*'s] singing," 5–6). His spirit has been so strengthened that he is ready not only to face the blows of fortune but also to hear the more bitter remedies necessary for his progress. Boethius frames this passage with statements that he is eager to listen further (*me audiendi avidum*, 1; *audiendi avidus*, 9), and later, *Philosophia* herself describes him as *te audiendi cupidum* and *ardore flagrares* (15 and 16). The rhetorical effects of poetry are on display here: Boethius is motivated to listen; he is persuaded that he is up to the challenge of freeing himself from his spiritual malaise. Poetry causes him *to want* to listen

54. O'Daly 1991: 42 argues that several Boethian passages take their cue from Lucretius, Lucr. 1.945–7, where the bitterness of doctrine goes down more easily with the sweetness of poetry. The notions of sweetness and pleasure are invoked in several passages in the *consolatio* (4.p6.57; 3.p1.1–2; 4.p6.6). We have already discussed how Boethius reverses the metaphor of sweetness and bitterness to blur categories between poetry and prose; 3.p1.1–2 and 4.p1.1 appear to comfortably combine sweetness and gravity. See Rees in this volume on the crossover between prose and poetry in panegyric discourse.

to *Philosophia*. So both philosophical argument and poetic motivation are central to therapy.

In two passages that follow, one in prose, 3.p1.13–14, and the other in the companion poem, 3.m1.5–6, the boundaries between the roles of philosophical and poetic discourse become more interchangeable: *Talia [remedia] sunt quippe quae restant, ut degustata quidem mordeant, interius autem recepta dulcescant* (Such [remedies], which now remain, sting once tasted, but when taken in more deeply they are sweet") and *dulcior est apium mage labor, / si malus ora prius sapor edat* ("The honey of bees is far sweeter if at first a bitter flavor bites the mouth"). The second passage repeats in a way the message of the first but with the difference that the first passage in prose refers to the initial bitterness of the remedies but sweetness in the longer term, whereas the second passage in verse views the sweetness of the remedies as a result of the bitterness of unfortunate experiences. The reworking of the trope functions to transition from philosophical poetry to poetry proper. Remedies are bitter initially and connect the bitter and the sweet. They are not sweet and deceptive, as Lucretius's aphorism recommended. The poetic passage adds a further wrinkle to this topos by expressing the idea in verse that bitter experience can be overcome by the sweet cure. Poetry is not playing the role of deceptive persuader. In fact, through emotional engagement and enthusiasm, it provides the examples and inspiration so that *vera dehinc animum subierint* ("truths may get into your mind," 3.m1.13). Boethius has repurposed a hackneyed but important image in order to reinvigorate poetry's ability to make truth claims or, at least, be included in a discourse that makes truth claims.

The third example of aesthetic repurposing is found in the use of the term *fabula* (story), which occurs only twice in the *consolatio*. At 3.p12.69–70, Boethius engages in a typical use of the term: "*Accepisti*," inquit, "*in fabulis lacessentes caelum gigantas . . .*" ("You have read in stories," [*Philosophia*] said, "of the giants challenging heaven"). Here, *fabulis* refers to fictional stories that are typically represented in poetry. But here the *fabula* of the gigantomachy is a metaphor for the clashing of arguments, a process that brings to light the truth.

In the poem that follows, 3.m12, the well-known Orpheus poem, Boethius engages in some rich mythologizing, recalling the stories (*fabulae*) of Orpheus and Eurydice, Ixion, Tantalus, and Tityus.[55] By the end of the poem, *Philosophia*

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55. Sweeney 2006: 47 summarizes 3m.1–5, 7, 9, 10, 12 as poems that define and refine the ideas of freedom and constraint.

focuses on the exemplarity of the Orpheus and Eurydice story and Orpheus himself.[56] The exemplarity of Orpheus forms the central *fabula*, which, *Philosophia* asserts, applies directly to the reader and Boethius himself:[57]

Heu, noctis prope terminus	Ah! By the very edge of night
Orpheus Eurydicen suam	Orpheus saw his Eurydice
vidit, perdidit, occidit.	lost and killed.
Vos haec fabula respicit	**This tale refers to you**
quicumque in superum diem	who seek to lead your mind
mentem ducere quaeritis.	into the upper day.[58]

These lines make clear the connection between *fabula* and moral truth.[59] Like the story of the gigantomachy, the tragedy of Orpheus's life elicits a truth; in the case of the former, the highest good and best arguments always prevail; in the case of the latter, to look back on one's failures can lead to grief, *quidquid praecipium trahit / perdit, dum videt inferos* ("Whatever excellence he takes with him, he loses, when he looks to those below," 57–8). The story of Orpheus forms the end of book 3 of the *consolatio*. That poet's example teaches Boethius (and readers, *vos*) the tragic limits of human endeavour; but it also inspires Boethius (and us) to go beyond Orpheus's (and Ixion's, Tantalus's, etc.) example of the human condition because turning inward can lead to clarity. Both Boethius and the reader are encouraged to turn back and reflect on the *fabula* of Orpheus, who

56. O'Daly 1991: 188–207 is a detailed and interesting study of 3.m12. Engaging mainly with Crabbe 1981 and Lerer 1985, as well as with the Platonic, Neoplatonic, and Latin literary traditions, O'Daly situates the interpretation of the poem in the following ways: "Orpheus is in some sense a type of the fallen and descended soul, captivated by the lower, and failing to achieve ascent towards the light of truth" (191); "It is both a paradigm for the soul's fall and flawed return or ascent, and at the same time it is a moral fable to be interpreted in the terms current in the poetic tradition—the power of love, whether it be flawed or 'true,' the conflict of feeling and rational control, and so on" (194); "he is not 'rewriting' any earlier poem. Rather, he is rewriting a complex tradition" that includes Greek and Roman philosophy and poetry (235).

57. It is worth emphasizing the parallels between Boethius and Orpheus. Both are represented as "complaining" about their fates: Orpheus at 3.m12.18, *inmites superos querens* ("complaining about the inscrutable gods above"), and Boethius at 1.p1.1, *querimoniam*, and at 1.p.2.1–2, *querelae*. Both are poets who boast of their early happy days in life and poetry, only to grieve and compose sad songs (*flebilibus modis*, 3.m12.7, and *maestos . . . modos*, 1.m1.2 and 3.m12.1–4; see 15–17 and 1.m1.1, 2–4). Both have had great success and failure in their lives. As O'Daly 1991: 192 has said concerning Orpheus, "[his] failure is complex, and includes considerable success." He adds, "the wondrous singer almost succeeds: he reaches the borders of darkness and light" (192). See Harrison in this volume for the association Claudian makes with Orpheus as a poet and a figure in the underworld.

58. *cons.* 3.m12.49–54.

59. See Hernández Lobato in this volume (295–304), where he discusses Fulgentius's idea of hidden truth underlying and transcending pagan *fabulae*. See also Ware in this volume on the tension between "generic expectations" of truth in prose and invention in poetry.

should not have turned back, in order to move forward themselves by returning to God.[60]

Moreover, the *fabula* of Orpheus provides a valuable model for reinterpreting Boethius's (Christian) poetics in light of pagan poetry and philosophy. The notions of turning back and returning are ideas that tap into the process of intertextuality. Just as a person looks back on his or her life to elicit truths about him or herself, so the poet looks back to his or her literary predecessors to express a truth in an original way (*vos haec fabula respicit*).[61] Boethius makes full use of his literary inheritance while discarding the debilitating opposition between philosophy and poetry. The *fabulae* of poetry are central to this project of the *consolatio*. Orpheus's failure, represented in poetry, does not correspond to a subordinate role of poetry in the work as a whole and is not part of Boethian poetics.[62] Poetry is not to be thought of as "in service" to philosophy. Rather, like philosophy, poetry operates on a human level, with all of its limitations, but nevertheless acts as a collaborator in the search for the truth. Books 4 and 5 carry on the therapy, focusing on the self-reflective turn within, further marshalling poetry and prose to achieve truth.

Far from a term that conjures up deceptive and mendacious storytelling in poetry, the application of *fabula* to the protagonist and the reader as a source of moral exemplarity that triggers inner reflection, a clear vision of the truth, even a connection to God, forms a fundamental part of the fabric of Boethian poetics. This approach functions as a response to the Platonist view of the falsity of myths that poets insert into their works. On the one hand, Plato can use poetic myths in order to articulate ideas that conventional prose (or philosophical argument) cannot, but on the other hand, myths in Plato can also be ambiguous and indeterminate, resisting clear-cut interpretations, such as the myth of Er. Boethius's use of mythic *fabulae* in poetry tends to eschew the ambiguous for a more determinate exemplarity.

His use of myth is strikingly similar to that of Prudentius. The theological side of poetry is manifest through Prudentius's idea of *fabula*, a Platonist and patristic byword for "false tale" that the poet transforms into a divinely sanctioned practice in which literary narrative and typological history complement

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60. Sweeney 2006: 48. She cites 3.m11.1–5, which exploits fully the metaphor of turning back into oneself to find the truth. She is responding to Wetherbee 1974: 78, who interprets the Orpheus story as an "admonitory exemplum" that portrays Orpheus as imprisoned through an "attachment to earthly things."

61. The verb *respicit* invokes a looking back that is directly applied to Boethius and the reader.

62. Crabbe 1981: 316 argues that Orpheus's whole career "is to be viewed as a failure." Orpheus is like Boethius and all human beings: we forget and as a result we make mistakes.

each other.[63] A *fabula* is an allegorical vehicle that makes the reader think of things he or she already knows. This innovation is paralleled in Boethius's use of mythical narrative in the prose and poetry of the *consolatio*. For both Prudentius and Boethius, this aspect of their poetics represents a muscular response to a restrictive Platonist/patristic poetics through the utility of stories as vehicles of truth. However, both writers remain committed to the ultimate Platonist goal of achieving connection to truth, the good, and God.

If we briefly compare Paulinus of Nola's attitude toward poetic *fabulae*, it is clear that a much stricter view obtains in his work, one that is akin to the idea from Plato's *rep.* 10 that poetic fictions must be hymns to God or (for Paulinus, Christian) heroes:

> *Non adficta canam, licet arte poematis utar.*
> *Historica narrabo fide sine fraude poetae;*
> *Absit enim famulo Christi mentita profari.*
> *Gentibus hae placeant ut falsa colentibus artes;*
> *At nobis ars una fides et musica Christus*

> Though I use the poet's art, the song I sing will
> not be invented. I shall tell it with a historian's
> truthfulness and without the poet's deceit, because
> a servant of God should not utter lies. Such
> techniques may satisfy non-Christians who
> cultivate falsehood, but our sole technique is faith,
> and our song is Christ.[64]

Paulinus circles the wagons, excluding all poetry except verse compositions dedicated to Christ's life and salvation history. His is a bold statement that draws clear lines between useful (Christian) poetry and mendacious (mostly pagan) poetry in order to articulate a new Christian poetics.[65] However, Paulinus's poetics remains mired in the opposition between Christian and pagan poetry. Boethius's more nuanced poetics underscores this observation, and Prudentius's work appears to be the tipping point at which early Christian poetics breaks free of this restrictive Platonist binary.

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63. See Mastrangelo 2008: 46–9 on Prudentius's use of the term *fabula* and its role in typological exemplarity.
64. PAUL. NOL. *carm.* 20.28–32.
65. See PAUL. NOL. *carm.* 10.43–5 for a similar attitude. On both passages, see Mastrangelo 2009: 323.

13.5. POETRY, PHILOSOPHY, AND DUALIST POETICS

At *cons.* 1.p4.18–21, still bitter at his personal misfortune, Boethius demands that *Philosophia* reckon with what he sees as the failure of Plato's (and *Philosophia*'s) political project:

> *atqui tu hanc sententiam Platonis ore sanxisti: beatas fore res publicas, si eas vel studiosi sapientiae regerent vel earum rectores studere sapientiae contigisset. Tu eiusdem viri ore hanc sapientibus capessendae rei publicae necessarium causam esse monuisti, ne improbis flagitiosisque civibus urbium relicta gubernacula pestem bonis ac perniciem ferrent.*

> It was you who established through the thought of Plato the principle that those states would be happy where philosophers were kings or their governors were philosophers. You, through that same Plato, told me that this was why philosophers must involve themselves in political affairs, so that the rule of nations not be left to the base and the wicked, bringing ruin and destruction on the good.

The life of Boethius the prisoner was in fact an attempt at the Platonic experiment, not merely an example of an intellectual unjustly charged but a philosopher in politics who, for all his noble efforts, received a death sentence: *sed innocentiam nostrum quis exceperit eventus vides; pro verae virtutis praemiis falsi sceleris poenas subimus* ("But you see what the result of my innocence has been: instead of a reward for true virtue, I am punished for a false crime," 1.p4.120–3). Boethius's disillusionment with the Platonist view of politics is clear. The idea of the impossibility of the philosopher king as an ideal appears to have refocused Boethius's attention on injustice of the world, in which the true and the false are confounded, a state of affairs that poetry can represent in all its variety. Could it be that the failure of the ideal of the philosopher king has led Boethius to re-examine poetry as a vehicle of truth, at least for the world he lives in?

In his most emotional moments, Boethius the prisoner implicates *Philosophia* herself: *sed, o nefas, illi vero de te tanti criminis fidem capiunt atque hoc ipso videbimur affines fuisse malefici, quod tuis inbuti disciplinis, tuis institute moribus sumus. Ita non est satis nihil mihi tuam profuisse reverentiam . . .* ("But they are so wickedly impious that it is actually from you that they derive their proof of this great charge: I shall appear to have been a close party to such a misdeed precisely because I am steeped in your learning and trained in your ways. So it is not enough that reverence for you shall have done me good," 1.p4.149–54). While the passage embodies the laments of a nearly broken man in need of *Philosophia*'s therapy, the substance of the complaint remains true. In the real

life of a human being in a political community, philosophy did not prevent Boethius's tragedy—nor should it have, as *Philosophia* argues later concerning the happiness of the good man and the never-ending desires of the bad man. The practice of philosophy/theology is not sufficient (*non est satis*, 152) for Boethius or any other human being to deal with earthly reality, especially a reality comprised of a church-state riven with philosophical/theological divisions. Although pure philosophical and theological knowledge remains slippery in the real world, the quest for such knowledge and truth for human beings, not to mention their moral health, requires philosophical *and* poetic tools. The *consolatio* reflects a dualism in its treatment of a series of existential problems that only both discourses, poetry and philosophy/theology, can hope to solve.

The need for both forms of discourse reflects this modified dualist conception that runs through the *consolatio* and is a pillar of Boethius's poetics. Boethius distinguishes between real life and the divine realm in several ways. For example, from a sense of political injustice, 1.m5 draws a distinction between God, creator and ruler of the universe, and a human ruler who acts alone, without any divine intervention (25–7). The result is that fickle *fortuna* becomes a major factor in the lives of human beings (*nam cur tantas lubrica versat / fortuna vices*? "Why else does slippery fortune change so much"? 28–9). Thus innocent people sometimes suffer evil: *homines quatimur fortunae salo* ("we humans are buffeted by the sea of fortune," 45). As Magee has pointed out, Boethius represents a world that is at odds with itself, governed by the *conditor orbis* (1) but tyrannized by *fortuna* and *perversi reges* (1.m5. 29, 31, 41).[66] The poem ends with an emotional plea for divinely guided human kingship, which seems futile[67]—confirmed by *Philosophia*, who in the following prose section interprets the plea as an emotional outburst proper to poetry (in *extremo Musae saevientis*, 1.p5.36).

The dualist dilemma presented in 1.m5, two opposing worlds in which divinity, perfection, and the good have little connection with the human condition, is also mentioned in 1.m6.20–3 but revisited in 4.m6. In that poem, *Philosophia* replies to Boethius's stinging indictment of the metaphysical system, not by denying its truth, but by reaffirming the underlying order of it all, the *celsus tonans* (1). Lines 34–48 function as a hymn to God, the *conditor altus*, who operates according to the universal law of love which "is common to everything" (*hic est cunctis communis amor*, 44). Reciprocal love (*alternus amor*, 17) harmonizes opposing forces and phenomena: *ut pugnantia / vivibus cedant umida siccis / iungantque fidem frigora flammis* ("that warring wetness yield to living dryness and the cold join faith with flames," 20–2).

66. Magee 2003: 154.
67. 1.m5.46–8 refer to Matt. 6:10. See Magee 2003:153.

Love's harmonizing function is more fully expressed in 2.m8, the last poem of book 2. Love works at both the divine and human levels, holding together the cosmic order (14–15) as well as nations, lovers, and friends (21–7; see also 3.m12.47–8). In two lines, the poet is able to connect the divine and human worlds through love: *si vestros animos amor / quo caelum regitur regat* ("May the love that rules heaven rule your spirits," 29–30). Love is simultaneously the philosophical principle of harmony of Empedocles and the binding social and emotional force for humanity. Without these two aspects of love, both the universe and humanity would be torn apart (16–18). Still, at this point of the *consolatio*, the question remains about how these two different versions of love, one universal and the other particular, the divine and the human, might connect; from the human perspective, love is necessary but not sufficient to prevent tragic events such as Boethius's imprisonment. The separation and commonality between these two registers of love, expressed fully in the poems 2.m8 and 4m.6, is emblematic of a dualist metaphysics that requires both philosophy and poetry to encompass. These poems reveal a particular version of dualism. Unlike typical Platonist dualism, which emphasizes the separation of the immaterial and the material, the perfect and the imperfect, Boethius, through an elegiac sensibility, highlights the two worlds as bound together or related to one another.

A similar opposition and resolution occurs in 5.m3 where Boethius himself articulates an argument against a compatibilist view of providence and free will.[68] From 5.p2.1–5, Boethius, in one form or another, tackles the difficult problem of the opposing truths of free will and determinism. Humans see the issue as a clash of opposites: *quis tanta deus / veris stauit bella duobus, / . . . an nulla est Discordia veris* ("What god establishes such a war between two truths . . . or is there no discord between truths," 5 m3.2–3; 6). Boethius has reached the point where he can admit that it is the human perspective that is limited and perhaps unable to make the leap of understanding to the connections of the divine and the universal to the human (*sed mens / . . . nequit / . . . rerum tenues noscere nexus?* ("But is the [human] mind not able to recognize the subtle connections in the universe"? 5.m3.8–10). In a traditional dualist scheme, truths about the divine universe and truths about human life inscrutably exist contrary to each other, for example, (1) God has foreknowledge of every event, and (2) humans have free will to choose in the moment any available action.

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68. See *cons.* 4.p.6.27–9, where providence is defined as all causes at once of all things within the divine mind (*in ipsa divinae intellegentiae puritate*); in other words, from the synchronic perspective of the divine mind. Fate is a version of providence from the human perspective, which sees reality unfold one cause and one event at a time.

Immediately before this counterargument to the compatibility of freedom and determinism, Boethius at 5.p3.92 argues that if there is no free will, then virtues and vices do not exist; that is, a person does not have responsibility for her actions. Moreover, prayer becomes pointless (101–7), and communion with the divine becomes an impossibility (107–10). In addition, Boethius at lines 73–8 rehearses the criticism of Tiresias's comment on his own prophesizing abilities: *quidquid dicam, aut erit aut non* ("whatever I will say, will happen or will not"; cf. HOR. *sat.* 2.5.59). It would seem that the statement is directed at the human perspective, the receiving of a divine prophecy in a human community: it can be devastatingly difficult to interpret. Or, it can be seen from the divine perspective: whatever happens, *p* or *-p*, God knows it. In addition, at 5.p4.47–54, *Philosophia* argues that small-scale events in the course of human life have no necessity; that is, they can either occur or not occur. Thus, she argues, there is room for human free will. Paradoxically, this would indeed support Tiresias's statement that what he says will either happen or not, be true or not. Boethius is not afraid to use the exemplar of a prophet to argue for the existence of free will and virtue and vice.

Boethius does assume a dualist scheme in which divine thinking and perception are separate from human thinking and perception. In fact, it is this Platonist conception that forms the central problem of the *consolatio*: the relationship between the divine and human worlds. How can Boethius the prisoner, who has lost his wealth, status—and soon his life—recognize and internalize the universal and divine truths about his own particular situation and the broader situation in which his fellow humans find themselves? For to answer this question will allow him (and readers) to cope with his (their) own, human reality. The *consolatio*'s form and content represents a response to this Platonist conundrum, not merely through the creative and argumentative manipulation of ideas such as providence, fate, chance, and free will but according to a literary aesthetics that puts forward poetry, rhetoric, and analytical argument as equal contributors to Boethius's project of internalizing divine thinking.

Boethius rounds out the picture of his modified dualist conception through his idea of (poetic) language as a mediator between the divine and human worlds. All human discourse is imperfect, including philosophical and theological discourse. If it is based on human reasoning, as this discourse is, it will indeed have limits for understanding the divine and humanity's relationship to the divine. In a passage of 4.p6 that attempts to elucidate the distinction between fate and providence, Boethius distinguishes between human reason and true understanding: *Igitur uti est ad intellectum ratiocinatio, ad id quod est id quod gignitur, ad aeternitatem tempus* ("as reasoning is to understanding, as that which becomes is to that which is, as time is to eternity" 4.p6.78–80).

Philosophical discourse is a fully human activity with divine aspirations. For Boethius and Prudentius the same applies to poetry. This reconceptualization of Platonist dualism opens a vital space for poetic discourse on the thorny problems of free will and the ontology of virtues and vices.

13.6. BOETHIUS AND PRUDENTIUS ON FREE WILL, VIRTUES, AND VICES

The dualist foundation of the Boethius's thought-world also produces in his work a Prudentian conception of the virtues and vices. Because human beings live in the world of good and evil to be freely chosen, virtues and vices are part and parcel of human life but not of the pure goodness of God. At 4.p7.44–5, Boethius emphasizes that a defining feature of virtue is the overcoming of adversity: *ex quo etiam virtus vocatur quod suis viribus nitens non superetur adversis* ("And this is indeed why it is called virtue, because, relying on its own powers, it is not overcome by adversity"). He further describes this adversity in martial terms twice: *sed haec eorum est qui vel in virtute positi contra aspera bellum gerunt, vel a vitiis declinantes virtutis iter arripiunt* ("But this is the case for those who, established in virtue, wage war against adversity, or who, avoiding vices, take the path of virtue," 4.p7.21–3); and *proelium cum omni fortuna animis acre conseritis, ne vos aut tristis opprimat aut iucunda corumpat* ("you engage in a mental battle with every kind of fortune, lest bad fortune oppress you or good fortune corrupt you," 4.p7.47–9). The spiritual adversity that results from fortunes, good or bad, exposes whether a person is virtuous or full of vice.

In the following poem, 4.m7, Boethius gives a series of mythological figures who experienced both good and bad fortunes. Agamemnon, Odysseus, and for most of the poem, Hercules, all struggle to get on fortune's good side. Agamemnon receives a great victory but suffers terrible misfortune: Odysseus also triumphs over his foes, but he does so at great cost; and Hercules performs his labours, but his madness looms. Humans struggle against the self, others, fortune, and the divine. This makes virtue difficult to achieve and internalize. *Philosophia* responds to this state of affairs by arguing at 4.p.7. 17–39 that for the virtuous person all fortunes are good because they provide opportunities for learning and the development of virtue.[69]

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69. Sweeney 2006: 53–6 discusses the notion of virtue as a struggle against adversity to show that Boethius's spiritual understanding is lacking; i.e., he has not realized that the world's and humans' natural inclination is toward virtue. Sweeney compares this idea of virtue and vice not to the Christian tradition but with Plato's articulation at *rep.* 392, in which virtue is hard and vice easy.

This approach to virtue and vice is readily apparent in the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius. There Prudentius portrays a never-ending struggle to internalize virtue and vanquish vice:

O quotiens animam, **vitiorum peste** *repulsa,*
sensimus incaluisse Deo! quotiens tepefactum
caeleste ingenium post gaudia candida taetro
cessisse stomacho! Fervent **bella horrida,** *fervent*
ossibus inclusa fremit et **discordibus armis**
non simplex natura hominis; nam viscera limo
effigiata premunt animam, contra ille sereno
editus adflatu nigrantis **carcere cordis**
aestuat, et **sordes** *arta* **inter vincla** *recusat.*

How often, when the **plague of sins** has been driven away, we have felt our soul aglow with God! How often, after these pure joys, have we felt our heavenly nature grow cool and yield to foul desire! **Savage war** rages hotly, rages within our bones, and humanity's two-sided nature is in an **uproar of rebellion**. For the flesh that was formed from clay oppresses the spirit, but again the spirit that issues from the pure breath of God is hot within the **prison house of the heart**, and even **in its close bondage** rejects the body's **filth**.[70]

The martial, medical, and Platonist representation of the virtues and vices in language, imagery, and content is canonized by Prudentius. The *consolatio* participates in this tradition. Boethius figures this internal battle in terms of diseased individuals whose faults need to be cut out (*veluti aegros ad medicum . . . culpae morbos supplicio resecarent,* 4.p4.150; also, *morbus animorum,* 151; *aegros,* 151), filth (*vitiorumque sordes,* 4.p.4.142), and war (*bellum discors; concordia* (4.m6.18–20); *bellum gerunt* (4.p7.22). Boethius can employ this tradition of description in ways different from Prudentius. For instance, at 4.p4.149–54 *Philosophia* argues that rather than hate the wicked, the good should pity them. This is far from Prudentius's attitude in the *psychomachia,* where hateful, vengeful virtues vanquish vices.

Finally, an approach similar to Prudentius's concerning the relationship between virtues/vices and free will forms a central part of the argument of the *consolatio.* Boethius treats the related problems of Providence versus Fate and

70. PRUD. *psych.* 899–907.

God's foreknowledge versus free will in books 4 and 5.[71] He makes the distinction that Fate is the working out of Providence on the human level through events we experience (4.p.6.58–60). In a vivid Neoplatonic simile, Boethius envisages Providence as an axis around which a series of concentric circles turn. The further out a person is, the further from the mind of God she is and therefore subject to the vicissitudes of fate (4.p.6.65–82). That is, as the concentric circles get further away, "free will becomes limited for human souls when they cease to be occupied in contemplating God's mind [the source of Providence], and is reduced still further when, given over to vices."[72]

At 5.m2.2–7, Boethius in another simile of sorts compares Phoebus's imperfect ability to see the future with the flawless foreknowledge of God (*magni conditor orbis*, 7). The following prose section, 5.p3, picks up this comparison to restate the consequences: if free will does not exist, virtues and vices would not exist (5.p3.92–4). The following poem, 5.m3.1–5, expresses the difficulty of what seem to be contradictory truths: how can free will and God's foreknowledge coexist? Boethius introduces the idea of the modes of cognition, in which God's epistemological perspective is separate from that of humans.[73] God's perspective is synchronic, not diachronic as in the case of humans. Without wading through the weeds of his argument, it is clear that virtue and vice are fundamentally human. In fact if one pursues knowingly only vice, then one falls to an ontological status of non-being (4.p2.98–101).

Two passages in the works of Prudentius associate free will with virtue and vice: *ham.* 669–801 and *symm.* 2.471–87. In a large and rich section of the *hamartigenia*, the poet puts forward not a systematic, analytic argument but a poetic, philosophical, and historical case for free will (*argumentum ingens, ham.* 667), the bones of which can be seen in the argument in books 4 and 5 of the *consolatio*. The biblical exempla of Adam and Lot are employed to prove the existence of free will, a topic stimulated by the problem of God's status as exclusively good. Prudentius simply stipulates that God must be completely good, since he gave humans the

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71. Marenbon 2003: 121–45 treats Boethius's argument in detail. Marenbon views the oppositions of providence vs. fate and God's foreknowledge vs. free will separately but as impinging on each other. He concludes that while Boethius solves the problem of God's foreknowledge vs. free will, he undermines it when he returns to the idea that God is the cause of all events. O'Daly 1991: 28 also sees a failure to solve the problem. For my purposes, the connection between the possibility of engaging in virtue and vice through freely chosen actions furnishes the central motivation for both Prudentius and Boethius.

72. See Marenbon 2003: 123–4.

73. "Modes of cognition" reflects the proposition that knowledge is relative to the knower, in this case God and humans. At 5.p4.75–7, *Philosophia* gives the crucial principle for this idea that knowledge depends on the knower, not the thing known. See Hernández Lobato in this volume on Sidonius, Fulgentius, and Augustine on knowledge.

opportunity to exercise free will after the Fall. A dualist conception is implicit in a brief expression of this idea: *labi hominis, servare Deo est* ("to fall is of man, to save is of God," *ham*. 665). In the world of humans, responsibility for the goodness and badness of actions implies free will. At *ham*. 686–96, Prudentius argues that without free will there would be no virtue (*nec tamen est virtus, ni deteriora refutans / emicat et meliore viam petat indole rectam*. "After all, it is not virtue, unless, by rejecting the worse, it springs forth and seeks the right path through a better nature," *ham*. 695–6). The language of virtue and vice, triggered by the idea of free will, occurs again within the exemplum of Adam (*elige rem vitae; tua virtus temet in aevum / provehat, aeternum damnet tua culpa vicissim*, "choose the way of life; may your virtue bring you to eternity, and your guilt, again, condemn you," *ham*. 705–6) and the exemplum of Lot's wife, whose choice, though not as destructive as Eve's, ruined her alone (*traxerat Eva virum dirae ad consortia culpae: / haec peccans sibi sola perit*, "Eve had drawn her husband into a partnership of cursed guilt: but this woman by her sin brought death on herself," *ham*. 741–2).

In addition, Prudentius highlights the motif of the choice to look back (*respicere*) or not, the choice that Lot made correctly but his wife failed (*ham*. 737, 758, 765, 766, 842). Looking back at the destruction of the city, a symbol of earthly attachments and doing wrong, results in death, whereas not looking back indicates virtue and unity with God and eternal life. Boethius's adaptation of the story of Orpheus in 3.m12 has been called an admonitory exemplum, where Orpheus represents earthly imprisonment through an "attachment to earthly things."[74] This picture has been recently nuanced by scholars who interpret Orpheus's looking back as his (and Boethius's) tendency to return to grief for earthly loss. As Sweeney has noted, the looking back or turning back metaphor also occurs at *cons*. 3.m11.1–5 and *cons*. 3.m12.52–8 and represents looking back in an effort to gain clear vision or see the light. *Cons*. 3.m12.52–8 makes the point that looking back does not accomplish these goals because the things lost are precisely those that must be left behind to progress (*quidquid praecipuum trahit / perdit, dum videt inferos*, "whatever excellence he takes with him, he loses when he looks on those below," *cons*. 3.m12.57–8). As mentioned earlier, at *cons*. 3.m12.52, *vos haec fabula respicit*, Boethius invites the reader to "look back" at the story (*fabula*) of Orpheus who "saw" (*vidit*, 51) his wife die. At 4.p4.106 and 108 Boethius uses forms of *respicere* twice to illustrate that a person can look back with a downward or upward gaze, to see the ground or the stars. Boethius is here tying textual memory and recall in the *fabula* to empirical experience in the world.

74. Wetherbee 1974: 78 is quoted by Sweeney 2006: 48. See n. 52.

Acquiring virtue by directing one's sight and soul upward triggers in both authors a Platonist vision in which ascent away from earthly things allows one to rise above fate: for example, in the second major passage, *symm.* 2.471–87, Prudentius, in the midst of revisiting the issue of free will, repudiates fate as something to rise above to achieve virtue. *Spirat enim maiora animus seque altius effert / sideribus transitque vias et nubila fati* ("for the soul breathes better and rises higher than the stars and goes beyond the paths and clouds of fate," *symm.* 2. 480–1).[75] Like Boethius, Prudentius's soul rises from a determinist fate to choosing virtue and knowing God: *quisque putat fato esse locum, sciat omniparentem / nosse Deum nulli vetitum fatalibus astris* ("Whosoever thinks there is room for fate, let him know that no one is prevented by fate in the stars from knowing God, the father of all," *symm.* 2. 477–8). These words come on the heels of Prudentius discussing individuals who are unjustly held in prison. His point is that if fate exists, then no one, the guilty or the innocent, would be responsible for his actions (*symm.* 2.471).

The necessary connection between free will and virtue/vice guides Prudentius's—and Boethius's—moral thinking. Moreover, the scenario parallels the portrayal of Boethius in his cell, a desperate person looking for a way out from his fate. Both writers have a more optimistic view—that human souls are able to overcome fate and reach the divine—than Plato. Boethius and Prudentius engage this problem of dualism through the *fabulae* of Orpheus (not to mention gigantomachy, Odysseus, and Agamemnon) and Lot, respectively. From these stories that reflect the dualist challenge of connecting the human and divine worlds, both authors derive the possibility of salvation through the mediating factor of free will as a function of the choice between virtue and vice. Pure goodness, eternal life, and heaven are possible for the flawed mortal on earth because of free will and the existence of virtues and vices. Both authors express this argument through poetic and philosophical/theological discourse. The merging of these discourses and the re-establishment of poetry's claims to truth produce a dualist poetics that acts as a response to a restrictive Platonist poetics that infused the conditions of poetic production.

13.7. Conclusion: Poetry and the Problem of Language

Scholars have remarked that the *consolatio* ends with a fragmented vision, a struggle to remain committed to virtue without having achieved a transcendent

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75. Compare the end of the *hamartigenia*, where the Platonist notion of the soul escaping the prison of the body (Prud. *ham.* 851, 927) gives way to a dream sequence in which the soul flies over creation for a near-divine perspective.

vision of the divine.[76] The unity of the dualist worlds of earth and heaven modelled in the poem at 3.m9 seems to have faded away. But the reasons for the difficulty of achieving such a unity are what the *consolatio* is about. The most important reason is that all forms of human discourse are imperfect. At *cons.* 3.p12.63–4, *Philosophia* alludes to the biblical text, Wisdom 8:1, at the end of a complex philosophical argument concerning the power of the highest good, God. Boethius responds that the very words themselves (*haec ipsa … verba*, 67) of *Philosophia* delight him (*delectant*, 67) much more (*multo magis*, 66) than the sum of her rational arguments (*rationum*, 66). The words that Boethius takes such delight in are the biblical quotations and fictive stories (*fabulae*), like the gigantomachy mentioned in the passage. Words are the focus at the end of 3.p12, where *Philosophia* invokes Plato's authority, saying, *cognatos de quibus loquuntur rebus oportere esse sermones* ("words should be akin to the things spoken about," 111–12). These passages tell readers that the best way to internalize important ideas is through delightful words—note the adverb *sauviter* embedded in the allusion to Wisdom 8:1, but those words must correspond exactly to the concepts they represent. Truth and pleasure (and motivation) intersect at a point where philosophy, the *fabulae* of poetry, and biblical wisdom meet. Boethius's works on logic[77] confirm this conclusion, since he argues that the non-identity of words and things is mediated by asserting distinctions and narrative relationships between them.[78] Because the structure of language does not correspond to the structure of reality (both corporeal and incorporeal), we are left with false natural philosophy and moral depravity, such as the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure—or, in Christian terms, a postlapsarian world. For Boethius, this state of affairs requires humans to have a metalinguistic discussion about the nature of language before applying words to things or concepts.[79] The *consolatio*'s form is an admission of this aspect of the human condition; namely, that philosophical and poetic discourses are bound together in the quest to represent divine and universal truths. They both fall short, but both are necessary for

76. Sweeney 2006: 61.

77. Sweeney 2006: 10–13 discusses this idea, which appears in Boethius's commentary on Aristotle's *peri hermeneias*. This is the exceptional instance when I refer to works outside of the *consolatio*. I have focused only on the internal evidence of the *consolatio* in order not to project assumptions from the "more Christian" texts.

78. Hernández Lobato 2012: ch. 6.3.3 and in this volume (284–7) develops the notion of "the poetics of silence" through an examination of Sidonius's *carmen* 9. He argues that by asserting a *recusatio* with no clear resolution, Sidonius furnishes a programmatic statement that posits the making of poetry as a self-defeating enterprise. For late antique poets, the relationship between language and the (divine) world is inscrutable, perhaps even futile.

79. Sweeney 2006: 8–10.

the human attempt to find truth; hence the merging of these discourses in the *consolatio*.

Prudentius appears to have that metalinguistic discussion at *ham.* 201–7 and 272–82.[80] In these passages, he describes Satan's tongue as "split" (*discissa,* 202) with "the art of varied speaking" (*varia ... arte loquendi,* 202) and part of our original sin and thus the source of vice (*hinc natale caput vitiorum,* "from here it is the fountainhead of the vices," 203). The human postlapsarian state has imposed on language an irrevocable association with vice.[81] Thus the linguistic tools that humans employ to refer to things and express ideas are imperfect. Metaphor, simile, and other forms of figuration are at best morally neutral features of language necessary for any type of discourse.[82] We cannot talk our way to the divine, and consequently, both Prudentius and Boethius admit all forms of discourse, including philosophy, are inadequate to the task. This observation catalyzes a poetics that does not see poetry in a (Platonist) hierarchical relationship to prose, dialogue, or philosophical/theological treatise. On the contrary, poetry, like philosophy or theology, may not produce divine truths, but human moral and spiritual truths are a different matter. A recognition of the limits of language allows Boethius and Prudentius to both marshal all the tools of language and construct a morality (i.e., the acquisition of virtue over vice) and internalize an approach to human fortune. In other words, the best that we can do is cure our spiritual ills through the activities of poetry and philosophy.

Read in this way and against the earlier example of Prudentius, the *consolatio* is a response to the question about why a committed Christian like Boethius wouldn't fall back on the revelation of salvation history at his most dire moment. The answer is that he does, but through the connecting of poetic and prosaic forms and sensibilities that represent the whole of human experience as it searches for truth.[83] This poetics, viewed as a response to early Christian Platonist strictures, moves beyond a poetics that is either Christian or secular. Finally, in the Christian poetry of Prudentius, the boundaries between poetic

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80. Malamud 2011: 104–9.

81. Malamud 2011: 105.

82. Malamud 2011: 109 makes the point that the appearance of Satan coincides with the first sustained simile in the *hamartigenia* and thus portrays the failure of language to represent truth.

83. Poems and prose sections use connective words to continue or conclude the topic under discussion. This is a way for Boethius in the *consolatio* to signal the unity between his poems and prose sections. Examples include *Ita est* at 4.p6.1, *haud aliter* at 1p3.1, *dum ...* at 1.p1.1, *igitur* at 3.p8.1 and 3.p10.1, and an epic locution at 5.p1.1, *dixerat*. See Magee 2003: 148. O'Daly 1991: 35 concludes that tension between poetry and rhetoric still exists in Boethius. But this can also be said for philosophical prose and rhetoric, as Plato in fact does with his distinction between true and false rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*.

and theological discourse become blurred.[84] By calling for the merging of different literary traditions, resuscitating the poetic concept of the *fabula*, and making poetry personal, that is, starting from human thought, emotion, and perception, Prudentius exhibits the beginnings of a fully developed Boethian poetics. And it is with Boethian poetics, indications of which permeate the work of Prudentius, that the *poeta philosophus/theologus* gains a secure foothold in Western literary history.

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84. Magee 2003: 147 n. 2 says "the *consolatio* will not sustain the naïve dichotomy, prose = 'philosophy', verse = 'literature.'" See also Curley 1987: 356, 359. O'Daly 1991: 34 (following Curley) remarks: "just as poetry is a serious part of the philosophical enterprise, so too the effects of poetry can be paralleled by those induced by prose." Form yields to content and a focus on the audience. Verse and prose are incidental to these priorities.