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## NOTE

This contribution is part of a larger dialogue of three articles and one responding piece that form the current issue of JOLCEL. The other contributions are “Writing in a World of Strangers: The Invention of Jewish Literature Revisited” by Irene Zwiép (pp. 1–20) and “A Critical Juncture: ‘Later’ Latin Literature, the Newest Late Antiquity, and the Period of the Western Classic” by Mark Vessey (pp. 22–42). The response piece is “Ins and Outs and Opened and Closed” by Danuta Shanzer (pp. 66–77).

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# The Ordeal of a Sixth-Century Josef K: Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae* as a Modernist Drama

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## ABSTRACT

In recent scholarship, several views have been propounded on the argumentative inconsistencies in Boethius' *De consolatione Philosophiae* and the inconclusiveness of its ending. In this article, it is argued that modern scholars still, perhaps unconsciously, adhere to aristotelian concepts of unity, coherence, and closure, which may not be helpful in assessing what Boethius is really trying to say. When analysed from a perspective usually associated with modernist literature, it becomes clear that Boethius' swan song is neither a deconstruction of 'pagan' philosophy nor an implicit plea for Christian spirituality but an existential drama in which religion and philosophy do not provide any consolation.

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## 1 Introduction

Boethius' *De consolatione Philosophiae* has been a classic for at least thirteen centuries,<sup>1</sup> but do we really understand what it is about or how the author intended it to be interpreted? Until recently, the book's presumed title was taken at face value and most modern scholars still believe in its soothing potential. Others, however, pay attention to problems regarding the argumentative structure and to the prisoner's conspicuous taciturnity at the end of the work, suggesting that eventually the character, or the author, was not consoled at all. One scholar,

<sup>1</sup> After two and a half centuries of obscurity, the work was introduced to Carolingian circles by Alcuin. From the end of the eighth century, it was an extremely popular book; it is transmitted in more than 400 manuscripts. On its reception, see e.g. Nauta, "The *Consolation*: the Latin commentary tradition, 800-1700," 255-78, and Wetherbee, "The *Consolation* and medieval literature," 279-302.

referring to its ‘Menippean’ ancestry,<sup>2</sup> even argued that *De consolazione Philosophiae* (henceforth *DcPh*) should be seen as a parody of philosophical discourse.

In this paper, I take my cue from the significant strand in recent scholarship concentrating on possible inconsistencies in *DcPh*’s plot and argumentation. Most prominent here are publications by Marenbon, Relihan, and Donato, to be discussed below. Notwithstanding the differences in their approaches, however, the scholars’ interpretative strategies appear to coincide in a crucial point: their strong and possibly inevitable tendency to look for coherence and closure.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, they all prove to be heirs to the ‘classical’, say Aristotelian, tradition of western readership. Well-written books are supposed to be coherent in that they display unbroken threads of narrative or argumentation and end in satisfactory conclusions. If *DcPh* lacks these characteristics and we still wish to consider it a successful work, it must either be unfinished or a parody. Or does it?

Framing the book as a late-antique or early-medieval classic affiliated to familiar genres such as *consolatio*, philosophical dialogue, or Menippean satire does not seem to be entirely satisfying, as I hope to demonstrate. Equally unconvincing I find interpretations inferring *e silentio* that *DcPh* is a hidden plea for Christian spirituality, although it is clear that in real life the author was a Christian. Instead, I propose to approach *DcPh* from a different angle, informed by my reading of Kafka, Beckett, and Orwell. After having given a synopsis of the work, I will discuss a few important voices in modern criticism, which leads to the vexed question of what it means to be, or to be seen as, ‘classical’. In my view, the urge to construe a harmony of form and content, deemed so typical of ‘classical’ works of arts, causes a misunderstanding of what happens in *DcPh*. Reading it from a perspective usually associated with modernist literature may yield a more satisfying, though heartbreaking, interpretation. That is what I intend to make plausible in this paper. To begin with, however, we must look at two famous characters in utter distress.

## 2 Josef K. and Oedipus

“Jemand mußte Josef K. verleumdet haben, denn ohne daß er etwas Böses getan hätte, wurde er eines Morgens verhaftet.”<sup>4</sup> The opening sentence of Kafka’s *Der Proceß* (1914) embodies the essence of the deeply pessimistic worldview we have

<sup>2</sup> Menippean satire, named after the Syrian philosopher Menippus of Gadara (third century BC), consists in a combination of prose and poetry; in the first quarter of twelfth century, the term *prosimetrum* was coined by Hugh of Bologna. Quintilian, *De institutione oratoria* 10.1.95, distinguishes the genre from regular *satura*, without using the term *menippea*. Unfortunately, it is difficult to prove that ancient readers had clear ideas about the genre’s characteristics. See Freudenburg, “Introduction,” 20, and, “Citation and authority in Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis*,” 95. An important study of prosimetrical texts in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, associating their polyphony with Mikhail Bakhtin, is Dronke, *Verse with Prose*.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *Poetic Closure*, 2, defines closure as a “sense of stable conclusiveness, finality, or ‘clinch’ which we experience” at the ending of a literary work; “a structure appears ‘closed’ when it is experienced as integral: coherent, complete, and stable.” Fowler, “Second Thoughts on Closure,” 5, emphasizes that closure may not be an aspect of the work itself but is attributed by the reader’s response.

<sup>4</sup> “Somebody must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, assuming he had not done anything evil, he was arrested,” Kafka, *Der Proceß*, 9. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

become accustomed to call kafkaesque, according to which human existence is situated within a fundamentally incomprehensible universe.<sup>5</sup> Cruel absurdity, the absence of justice, ruthless repression by anonymous and unaccountable powers characterize Kafka's fictional world, in which the protagonist's attempts to save himself fatally enhance his gruesome plight. In this respect, Kafka has become an icon of modernist literature: his works are believed to express the anxieties typical of post-Christian European culture in the twentieth century. It might be argued that Oedipus, in Sophocles' tragedy, finds himself in an ordeal similar to Josef K.'s, in that he also ruins his own life by trying to solve problems he did not bring about consciously, which nonetheless does not reduce his responsibility.<sup>6</sup> For Oedipus, the only way out is by procuring his own demise.

Differences between the tragedy and the novel, however, are more important than the similarities. Oedipus may be the tragic victim of the combined forces of fate and his outstanding personal qualities, but at the end of the play he completely understands what has happened and courageously accepts the consequences. Although the nature of fate and the gods remains mysterious, both playwright and audience assume divine order to be consistent. For Josef K., on the other hand, the world is utterly incomprehensible. In the end, he may accept the inevitability of his execution, but his passive compliance is not dictated by understanding: he does not even understand his own motives. Moreover, the author denies us any clues to explain what happens to Josef K. We never learn why he is arrested and which factors operate the system, if any, that destroys him.

The prisoner's situation in *DcPh* may be compared with what happens to Josef K. and Oedipus. Arrested and sentenced to death as an innocent man (at least that is what he makes us believe), he finds himself trapped in a system which reduces him to a pawn in an inscrutable game of both political and metaphysical chess. Like Oedipus, he has come to understand the inevitability of his helplessness, but unlike the tragic hero, he does not meekly accept it. Like Josef K., he stubbornly (albeit politely) persists in resistance until he has to reluctantly acknowledge the overriding power of Philosophy's arguments. He may resign, seeing that there is no way out, but he does not consent. The author leaves us in an uncomfortable situation of inconclusiveness.

### 3 Synopsis of *DcPh*

*De consolatioe Philosophiae*, if that is its correct title,<sup>7</sup> was written by Boethius when he was imprisoned (in the fall of 523 CE) by the Ostrogothic king Theodoric

<sup>5</sup> A fine essay on Kafka is Bloom, "Kafka: Canonical Patience and 'Indestructibility,'" in his *The Western Canon*, 416–30.

<sup>6</sup> On Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, see Hall, *Greek Tragedy*, 302–5, with bibliography, 389–91.

<sup>7</sup> In the medieval manuscripts, the title is given as *Philosophiae consolatio* or *De consolatioe Philosophiae*; see *apparatus criticus* in Boethius, *De consolatioe Philosophiae*, 3 (this is the edition I will refer to; in accordance with the scholarly tradition, prose passages will be indicated by *pr* and poems by *m* (= metrum)). Since the word *consolatio* or its cognates are not found in the text of the work itself, it is doubtful which title Boethius had in mind for it, if any. Since I do not believe the work to provide consolation, I hesitantly opt for *De consolatioe Philosophiae*, meaning that the book may be *about* consolation, without the implication of being consolatory itself.

and may have realized he would be executed within the not too distant future (although he does not say so clearly).<sup>8</sup> Since the work, counting five *libri*, is not dedicated to a friend or patron, which is unusual for literary texts of this period, the author may have composed it to console himself in the first place, but its well-considered prosimetrical structure and elaborate style rule out the possibility that it is merely meant to give vent to the frustrations and distress of one particular individual. We do not know how long he had to wait for his execution, but he must have been dead by 526. Neither do we know anything concerning the physical or material conditions of his imprisonment. Was he allowed to see visitors or to read books? He does not tell us.<sup>9</sup>

In the first book, a nameless prisoner is visited by a supernatural lady who after a couple of pages turns out to be Philosophy herself.<sup>10</sup> He complains about the injustice he has suffered, she intends to cure him of his mental illness by showing the irrelevance of earthly goods and demonstrating the perfection of the divine world order. At first, the prisoner seems to be willing to follow her argument, but when, at the end of Book 3, Philosophy claims to have proven her points, the prisoner protests (3.pr12.30–35). He believes her reasoning to be circular, which she, to his bewilderment, is happy to confirm (3.pr12.36–38). Book 3 is concluded in a song about Orpheus, who by looking back loses both his wife and the opportunity to retrieve his bliss.

In the opening paragraph of Book 4, the prisoner politely interrupts Philosophy. He clearly does not want to talk about the otherworldly metaphysical constructs of Neoplatonism and more or less forces her to discuss justice and injustice in the sublunary domain. She then explains that human perception of justice is mistaken: being harassed by successful criminals may be experienced as unfair, but seen from a divine perspective everything is just OK. Although this does not seem very comforting to the prisoner, he grudgingly agrees, not being able to refute Philosophy's argumentation. He has, however, one more question: if it be true that God is the ruler of the universe, what freedom to think and to act do we have as individual agents?

This is the theme of the fifth and final book. Philosophy makes a distinction between human existence situated in time on the one hand, and eternal divine providence on the other. From the perspective of God, everything takes place at one timeless moment, which implies its inalterability. For human beings, life is chaotic and incomprehensible. They may certainly choose between good and evil, but God already knows the outcome. Now, the prisoner refrains from

<sup>8</sup> In *DcPh* 4.pr6.5 Philosophy hints to the fact that the prisoner's time is limited (*angusto limite temporis*). On the circumstances of Boethius' demise, detention, and execution, see Chadwick, *Boethius*, 56–68; Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius*, 10–14; Moorhead, "Boethius' life and the world of late antiquity," 18–22; Bjornlie, *Politics and Tradition Between Rome, Ravenna and Constantinople*, 138–44, 163–84.

<sup>9</sup> In 1.pr1.14 a *lectulus* (little bed) is mentioned; in the next poem Philosophy speaks about chains (*pressus grauibus colle catenis*, 1.m2.25), but these may be interpreted symbolically. In 1.pr4.3 the prisoner complains about the loss of his library, subsequently described as richly adorned in 1.pr5.6 (Philosophy speaking). Both Gleib, "In carcere et vinculis?," 225–38, and Reiss, "The fall of Boethius and the fiction of the *Consolatio Philosophiae*," 37–47, suggest that many details in *DcPh* may be fictive and symbolic.

<sup>10</sup> The prisoner's name is never mentioned, but his speech in 1.pr4 abounds in details contemporary readers must have recognized as referring to Boethius.

responding.<sup>11</sup> He appears to be trapped in two ways: captive in jail, he is also denied real agency from a metaphysical point of view. The work is concluded in Philosophy's exhortation to pray.

#### 4 Modern scholarship

In the view of both medieval and modern scholarship, *DcPh* is not so much an egodocument as an accomplished literary work of great beauty and philosophical depth addressed to a general audience. From the Carolingian period till today, it is rightly considered a highlight of late antique or early medieval literature. Most readers took its consolatory aims and success as self-evident.

If so many readers felt comforted by the book, cannot we conclude that this must be what the author intended to achieve? But what if all those readers, deluded by the book's purported title and supposed biographical context, failed to notice hints pointing at a different, less optimistic interpretation? Over the past forty years, several scholars discussed serious gaps and changes of direction in *DcPh*'s narrative and argumentative structure, proposing divergent solutions to explain them. I can only mention the most influential of these interpretations.<sup>12</sup>

Ever since Seth Lerer published *Boethius and Dialogue* in 1985, scholars have been debating at least three problems. Firstly, why does the prisoner stop responding to Philosophy's argument in the final half of the fifth book? Secondly, should the change of subject at the beginning of Book 4, where the prisoner refuses to follow Philosophy on her lofty path of abstract speculation about the nature of God and compels her to address the apparent lack of justice in human society, not be seen as Philosophy's failure to lead the prisoner away from human affairs? In other words, how successful is her consolatory strategy? Thirdly, how do the thirty-nine poems,<sup>13</sup> or songs, function within the work's narrative and dialectical structure? Is it helpful to invoke the generic label 'Menippean satire'?<sup>14</sup>

John Marenbon (2003) and Joel Relihan (2007) discuss the indisputable fact that, while the first three books show a steady ascent from personal catastrophe to spiritual enlightenment, the final books return to the human level of ethics and individual agency, due to the prisoner's insistence on his horrible

<sup>11</sup> The ending of the prisoner's speech in 5.pr3.36 seems to be his final utterance, unless we also attribute the ensuing song (5.m3) to the same speaker. Afterwards, there are only two instances (5.pr6.19 and 40) where a (rhetorical) question formulated by Philosophy is answered by the single word *minime* ("no, certainly not"). In the first instance, it might be argued that the prisoner is the speaker, although it is more probable that Philosophy responds to her own question; the second *minime* is certainly spoken by her. See Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius*, 400, and a more detailed discussion in Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue*, 229–30, who suggests that the attribution may be deliberately ambiguous.

<sup>12</sup> An immense number of books and articles is devoted to *DcPh*, and the debate goes on. Overviews of scholarship can be found in Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius*, 405–44; Marenbon, *Boethius*, 219–35, and Magee and Marenbon, "Bibliography," 311–39. The first in-depth study of *DcPh*'s sources and models is Courcelle, *La Consolation de philosophie dans la tradition littéraire*. See also Crabbe, "Literary Design in the *De Consolatione Philosophiae*," 237–74.

<sup>13</sup> Marenbon, *Boethius*, 146–47, mistakenly speaks of forty-two poems.

<sup>14</sup> Although *DcPh* may be compared to other prosimetrical texts from Antiquity, it is absolutely unique in the regularity with which prose and poetry alternate, and in the variety of metrical forms. See Donato, *Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy as a Product of Late Antiquity*, 104–6.

circumstances.<sup>15</sup> Instead of arguing that his questions are irrelevant from the perspective of Neoplatonist spirituality as explained in Book 3, Philosophy seriously but slightly inconsistently tries to respond to his anxieties without ever gaining his full assent. The dialogue does not end in a satisfactory conclusion and the prisoner is never represented as serenely consoled. Even worse, Book 5 is abruptly closed by Philosophy's surprising call to prayer (5.pr6.47) which appears to contradict her view of God's inaccessibility.<sup>16</sup>

Marenbon, as philosopher clearly taken aback by the argument's inconsistencies,<sup>17</sup> feels obliged to make plausible they are deliberate: in his view, Boethius intended to demonstrate the limits of philosophical discourse. Since *DcPh* "juxtaposes the Christian Boethius with a non-Christian Philosophy, any shortcomings in Philosophy's views can be read as pointing to the limitations of philosophy for Christians."<sup>18</sup> The prosimetrical form is of essence because Philosophy uses the poetry "as a way of adumbrating truths that she cannot capture through straightforward philosophical reasoning."<sup>19</sup>

To Relihan, a specialist in Roman satire, *DcPh* is a Menippean satire, an intertextually playful though essentially serious parody aimed at the deconstruction of classical philosophy, in order to implicitly show the superiority of Christian spirituality.<sup>20</sup> *DcPh* is to be seen "as a work that does not accomplish what it sets out to do" and "it does so intentionally, and [...] its larger goal is to demonstrate the limits of philosophy as understood, or misunderstood, by an author who refuses to accept its transcendent nature."<sup>21</sup> In Relihan's view, "the professed methods and intended goals of Philosophy are resisted by a prisoner who chooses the path to God of Christian prayer rather than of pagan transcendence."<sup>22</sup>

Antonio Donato (2013) may concur with Marenbon and Relihan in seeing Philosophy's threads of argumentation as inconsistent at first sight, but by adducing a host of different sources ranging from Plato to Proclus, he argues that Philosophy's therapeutical method is in agreement with Neoplatonist practices and late-antique rhetorical taste and education.<sup>23</sup> This statement, however, plausible though it may be, does not eliminate Philosophy's argumentative flaws, as is conceded by Donato himself.<sup>24</sup> Rightly stressing the compatibility of ancient

<sup>15</sup> Marenbon, *Boethius*, 96–145, extensively analyses the argumentative structure. Relihan, *The Prisoner's Philosophy*, 15–33, offers his interpretation of the structure, referring to Marenbon.

<sup>16</sup> Some scholars have taken the unexpected ending as an indication for *DcPh*'s unfinished state. The problem is discussed by Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius*, 403, and Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue*, 232–36.

<sup>17</sup> "Although Philosophy is presented as providing authoritative answers to the questions Boethius raises at the beginning of the work, the arguments she gives do not on scrutiny seem to fit together in supporting a single, coherent position." Marenbon, *Boethius*, 146.

<sup>18</sup> Marenbon, *Boethius*, 162.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> "I claim that in reading *Consolation*, as in reading the other late classical Menippean satires, most scholars have simply missed the joke." Relihan, *The Prisoner's Philosophy*, 9. See also *idem*, "Late Arrivals," 109–22.

<sup>21</sup> Relihan, *The Prisoner's Philosophy*, 13.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>23</sup> Donato, *Boethius' Consolation*, in particular 105–52.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 87–91.

philosophical culture with Christian views,<sup>25</sup> Donato, again in accordance with Marenbon and Relihan, assumes Boethius strove to demonstrate the limitations of philosophy: "He is a philosopher and his despair is, ultimately, caused by the realization that philosophy, which he considered, throughout his life, to be a reliable instrument for understanding the world, is actually unable to offer any answer;"<sup>26</sup> "I suggest that the *Consolation* reveals not *Philosophy's* failures but her boundaries."<sup>27</sup> In order to be really consoled, the prisoner should not resort to ingenious dialectics but to the wisdom that can only be found in God.<sup>28</sup> It is this final step in Donato's argument I cannot agree with, as I will make clear below.

Stephen Blackwood (2015) is the first scholar to extensively analyse the thirty-nine poems as a musical, metrical, and spiritual sequence.<sup>29</sup> To him, there are no inconsistencies in *DcPh*, provided that one is willing to undergo the musical structure ritually, preferably more than once, almost subconsciously taking in its soothing qualities.<sup>30</sup> To Blackwood—and in this respect he is in agreement with Relihan and Donato—*DcPh* is a Christian project.

Different though these approaches may be, there is one aspect in which they all concur: they look for coherence, unity, and closure. They either construe the work in such a way as to prove its essential consistency (Lerer, Donato, Blackwood) or they interpret its perceived inconsistencies as the author's strategy to implicitly signal the ultimately disappointing contribution of pagan philosophy to happiness (Marenbon, Relihan). In both cases we read a book written by an expert philosopher exploring the limitations of his profession, suggesting, perhaps, that Christianity may offer the next step in spiritual satisfaction, although he does not say so explicitly.

## 5 Coherence and literary context

Perhaps it is only natural to expect a work of art to be more or less coherent. One of the factors leading to prehistoric art and oral literature must have been the urge to create surveyable scale models of (parts of) a world that in itself was experienced as overwhelmingly incomprehensible and dangerous.<sup>31</sup> Anyone telling a story constructs some kind of a plot, a chain of events having a beginning and an ending. And if the plot does not cohere in a transparent way, the audience will do their

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 166–72, shows "the extent to which Greco-Roman culture and Christianity were intrinsically integrated in Boethius' time and his cultural environment," 172.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 190–91.

<sup>29</sup> Blackwood, *The Consolation of Boethius as Poetic Liturgy*. Before Blackwood, the only monograph focused on *DcPh's* lyrics is O'Daly, *The Poetry of Boethius*. Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius*, 18–24, was the first to examine the order of the poems as a more or less cyclical composition.

<sup>30</sup> Blackwood, *The Consolation of Boethius as Poetic Liturgy*, 235: "crucial to the *Consolation's* therapy is the spiritual exercise, for both the prisoner and the listener, of its intricate system of rhythmic repetition that, in its entirety, is itself a narrated repetition to be repeated, and into which the listener enters each time more deeply, and so is ever more deeply recollected and reformed."

<sup>31</sup> A brilliant and thought-provoking book on the evolutionary origins of art and literature is Dutton, *The Art Instinct*, 103–34, deals with the importance of storytelling and fiction as a strategy to cope with the unpredictability of reality.



best to fill in the gaps in order to reconstruct it, making use of contextual evidence, e.g. historical circumstances or narrative conventions.

One of our strategies to attribute unity and coherence to texts perceived as difficult is comparing them with similar ones we think we understand better.<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, scholars analysing ancient literature will search for generic affiliations and attempt to reconstruct contemporary poetics. However, choosing a particular frame, or set of frames, directs the focus to particular aspects of the text while obscuring others. After all, every piece of literature is unique; if not, it is worthless and superfluous. So, how to choose the correct frame that both establishes a helpful context and highlights the individual work's singular qualities?

When, for instance, reading a Biblical epic from the fifth century, it is self-evident that Vergil and the Bible partake of the poem's literary context.<sup>33</sup> But what if the work at hand does not resemble any other work closely, as is the case with Boethius' *DcPh*?<sup>34</sup> Being written in the first half of the sixth century, at the crossroads of classical and Christian culture, by an erudite expert at Aristotelian logic who certainly was a Christian himself, the *DcPh* invites the reader to apply both classical and Christian labels. What do these labels imply?

## 6 Winckelmann, Aristotle, and Horace

In the collective memory of western discourse on art history, J.J. Winckelmann's *Gedancken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Wercke in der Malerey und Bildhauer-Kunst* (1755) is a seminal text.<sup>35</sup> It still seems to be impossible, even more than two and a half centuries after its first publication, to use the word 'classical' without recalling Winckelmann's evocation of Greek sculpture. When he coined the famous phrase "edle Einfalt und stille Grösse," complacently repeating it twice, he was thinking of the visual arts:

Das allgemeine vorzügliche Kennzeichen der Griechischen Meisterstücke ist endlich eine edle Einfalt, und eine stille Grösse, so wohl in der Stellung als im Ausdruck. So wie die Tiefe des Meers allzeit ruhig bleibt, die Oberfläche mag noch so wüten, eben so zeigt der Ausdruck in den Figuren der Griechen bey allen Leidenschaften eine grosse und gesetzte Seele.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> According to Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 138, readers tend to "naturalize" texts they do not immediately understand by bringing them "into relation with a type of discourse or model which is already, in some sense, natural and legible."

<sup>33</sup> Roberts, *Biblical Epic and Rhetorical Paraphrase in Late Antiquity*.

<sup>34</sup> Of course, *DcPh* shares formal characteristics with Platonist (and Ciceronian) philosophical dialogue and prosimetrical works like Martianus Capella's *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, but its strictly regular structure and the combination of both models are unique.

<sup>35</sup> Winckelmann, *Gedancken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Wercke in der Malerey und Bildhauer-Kunst*. See Potts, "Winckelmann," 984–87.

<sup>36</sup> "In sum, the most prominent characteristic of the Greek masterpieces in general is a noble simplicity and a quiet grandeur, as regards both posture and expression. Just like the depths of the sea remain calm despite the surface's turbulence, the Greek figures' expression shows a grand and stable soul, filled with strong emotions though it may be," Winckelmann, *Gedancken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen*

True, he does suggest its applicability to a limited body of Greek texts but refrains from elaborating upon this.<sup>37</sup> I believe, however, that Winckelmann’s requisites of noble simplicity and quiet greatness are in perfect accord with statements in Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Horace’s *Ars poetica* – not coincidentally so, of course, seeing that Winckelmann refers to the *Ars* more than once.<sup>38</sup>

Aristotle, discussing tragedy, famously defines it as “μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐχούσης” (“an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude”),<sup>39</sup> subsequently dealing with the self-contained unity of the plot and the dignity of its characters. Horace, speaking about poetry in general, also propounds the requirements of unity and absence of intricate and superfluous details: “denique sit quoduis, simplex dumtaxat et unum” (“in sum, it may be whatever you like, as long as it is simple and one”).<sup>40</sup> Aristotle and Horace suggest that this unity pertains to both form and content, which are supposed to cooperate in harmony: this is the principle of *decorum* prescribing *uerba* perfectly fitting the *res*.<sup>41</sup>

So, Winckelmann’s definition may represent ideals really dating back to Classical Antiquity. Not surprisingly, however, they may also be found outside the context of European classics and Classicism: one thinks of Chinese poetry from the classical era, but of sonnets by Mallarmé and Rilke as well. Apparently, we like things to be perfect and self-contained.

Even so, finding literary works that completely meet Aristotle’s and Winckelmann’s standards proves to be problematic. Sophocles’ *Oedipus* and Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Tauris* are highly appreciated by Aristotle, as are Homer’s epics,<sup>42</sup> but he seems to be severely critical towards most other works. Horace even deliberately undermines his explicit programme by structuring the *Ars* itself as a puzzling labyrinth.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, strictly applying the ideals of classical greatness and noble coherence may well be unfair to virtually any works of art, music, and literature.

*Wercke in der Mahlerey und Bildhauer-Kunst*, 28–29; the combination “edle Einfalt” and “stille Grösse” is repeated on 30, 33.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 30: “Die edle Einfalt und stille Grösse der Griechischen Statuen ist zugleich das wahre Kennzeichen der Griechischen Schriften aus den besten Zeiten; die Schriften aus Socrates Schule.” Winckelmann apparently refers to Plato and Xenophon.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 6 (title page): *AP* 268–69; 30: *AP* 240–42; 47: *AP* 316, 7, 421. Aristotle’s *Poetics* is only referred to in the *Erläuterung der Gedanken von der Nachahmung* (the sequel to *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Wercke in der Mahlerey und Bildhauer-Kunst*, published in 1756), in *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der Griechischen Wercke in der Mahlerey und Bildhauer-Kunst*, 122 (“Erdichtung, die Seele der Poesie”): *Poetic*, 1450a38–39 “ἀρχὴ μὲν οὖν καὶ οἷον ψυχῆ ὁ μῦθος τῆς τραγωδίας” (“So the plot is the source and (as it were) the soul of tragedy,” Aristotle, *Poetics*, 12).

<sup>39</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Horace, *AP* 23.

<sup>41</sup> The distinction between *res* and *uerba* is made by Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 3.3.1 and 3.5.1. *Decorum* or *aptum* is the principle that form should match content; see Quintilian 11.1. The essential unity of form and content is postulated in most western criticism of the twentieth century, from Russian Formalism and the New Critics to Structuralism: any formal element in a literary work is supposed to contribute to its meaning, while, conversely, any element of content should be discernible in the form. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 170–72; Bertens, *Literary Theory*, 22–23 (on close reading and coherence); Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*, 65–88.

<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* 1452a24–26, 33; 1453b7; 1454b7–8 (on *Oedipus*); 1454a7–8; 1455a18–20 (on *Iphigenia*); 1460a5–1460b4 (on Homer).

<sup>43</sup> See Russell, “Ars Poetica,” 113–26.

In fact, Aristotle's—and, subsequently, Winckelmann's—tenets of unity, coherence, and closure appear not to be representative of ancient art theories and practice in general, as was convincingly argued by Malcolm Heath.<sup>44</sup> While Horace sardonically demolished his own principles by deliberately failing to comply with them, we find many 'classical' texts displaying a blissful negligence of simplicity, balance, clear coherence, and obvious closure. Pindar comes to mind, Lucan's *Pharsalia*, Petronius' *Satyricon*, and even Vergil's *Aeneid*, with its unsolved conflicts and eerie finale.<sup>45</sup> We still regard them as masterpieces.

That we are now able to see beauty and greatness in staggering polyphony, fragmentary narrative, and failure to transparently give expression to traumatic experiences may be the result of our familiarity with modernist literature from the twentieth century. Many modernist writers radically renounced unity, coherence, and closure, opting instead for the representation of human existence as an experience of inscrutable and horrific chaos; apart from Kafka, one could think of T.S. Eliot, Jackson Pollock, or American freejazz.<sup>46</sup> To be sure, some modernists did not object to formal unity at all—I mentioned Mallarmé already, and I could add composers like Anton Webern and sculptors like Constantin Brancusi.<sup>47</sup> What makes this second category of works equally modernist is their inhospitable autonomy: there seems to be no comfortable place for human beings inside these works and it is up to the eye of the beholder to attribute meaning to them. The 'natural' bond between form and content is broken. Samuel Beckett's late prose may be seen as the apogee of this movement, when he expresses the utter meaninglessness of human existence in musically composed sentences of a haunting beauty.<sup>48</sup> Would it be conceivable to presume the possibility of this kind of literature in 'classical' Antiquity?

Notwithstanding the eye-opening development of western literature and criticism in the twentieth century, many classicist scholars still cling to Aristotelian *casu quo* Winckelmannian ideals of unity and closure, especially when confronted with intriguing works that appear to give conflicting clues as to their meanings. This is what happens in the case of *DcPh*. The balanced formal structure is evident, but what about the therapeutic progress coming to a halt? As mentioned above, the apparent discrepancy between form and content is usually solved by postulating unity on a higher level of interpretation: assuming that our text is complete, we should take the inconclusiveness of the argument as an unspoken

<sup>44</sup> Heath, *Unity in Greek Poetics*. Heath, 5, introduces the term "centrifugal" to characterize tendencies to escape from (possibly boring) unity, while pointing to the critical term *ποικιλία* ("variety and diversifying embellishment," 28) used by e.g. Plato and the Homeric scholiasts.

<sup>45</sup> On the ending of the *Aeneid*, see Hardie, "Closure in Latin Epic," and Putnam, *The Humanness of Heroes*.

<sup>46</sup> In the cases of Pollock and freejazz, of course, another factor was also crucial: the urge to liberate themselves from aesthetic norms experienced as oppressing.

<sup>47</sup> The Dutch scholar Guus Sötemann once made a helpful distinction between "pure" and "impure" modernists, the first category comprising artists aspiring to create beautiful autonomous, self-sufficient objects (Mallarmé, Rilke's sonnets, Webern), while the second group tried to incorporate all the world's noise and chaos into their works (Pound, Joyce, Eliot). Sötemann, "Twee modernistische tradities in de Europese poëzie." Connections between Aristotle and Modernism have been explored by Rosenthal, *Aristotle and Modernism*.

<sup>48</sup> One thinks particularly of stories such as *All Strange Away*, *Company*, *Worstward Ho*, and *Stirrings Still*, in Beckett, *The Grove Centenary Edition*.

statement on the powerlessness of pagan philosophy, consequently, according to some scholars, implying the superiority of Christian religiosity. I believe this approach to be mistaken.

## 7 Boethius' creed

Boethius was certainly a Christian, but apart from his theological treatises, the atmosphere of which is more Aristotelian than spiritual, his works appear not to exhibit any real interest in what is conventionally understood by religiosity.<sup>49</sup> Donato and numerous other scholars rightly state that in the eyes of most late-antique upper-class intellectuals it was quite normal to be a devout Christian and to simultaneously study Platonist philosophy and enjoy the poetry of Homer, Ovid, and Juvenal.<sup>50</sup> This does not rule out the possibility, of course, of somebody's concluding at the end of the day that in situations of agony and distress the Christian creed had more to offer in the way of solace and salvation than Ovid's laments or Proclus' esoteric jugglery with abstractions. Is that what happened to Boethius when he was writing *DcPh*?

One of the most interesting recent studies on *DcPh* is Stephen Blackwood's book on the poems, mentioned above. Blackwood meticulously analyses the metrical and thematic correspondences between them, revealing a magnificent, almost perfectly symmetrical musical structure that could be experienced subconsciously.<sup>51</sup> In his view, reading (aloud) the complete cycle of poems more than once would work like a ritual comparable to Christian liturgy as Boethius and his contemporaries knew it. In medieval monasteries this reading practice, conventionally termed *lectio divina*, was seen as a preparation to prayer.<sup>52</sup> Of course, nothing precludes this ritual application of *DcPh*'s poetry: any text, even a meaningless one,<sup>53</sup> may be used to induce religious concentration and contemplation. But does the text of *DcPh* voice these anagogic goals? I do not think so; and attributing Christian spirituality to a work that itself does not give any clear hints as to its devotional content or aims seems problematic to me.

This is the first reason to deny the *DcPh* a predominantly Christian nature. The author consequently employs the idioms of classical poetry, Ciceronian rhetoric, Stoic asceticism, Platonic dialogue, Neoplatonist theology, and Aristotelian dialectic to tell his story, without referring explicitly to Biblical lore, Jesus,

<sup>49</sup> Much has been written about Boethius' experience of Christian religiosity. See e.g. Chadwick, *Boethius*, 247–53; Marenbon, *Boethius*, 154–59; Donato, *Boethius' Consolation*, 163–96. Olmsted, "Philosophical Inquiry and Religious Transformation in Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* and Augustine's *Confessions*," 33–35, emphasizes Boethius' rational approach to God, lacking Augustine's emotional submission.

<sup>50</sup> See for instance Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, 1–13, and Donato, *Boethius' Consolation*, 166–72.

<sup>51</sup> The two appendices in Blackwood, *The Consolation of Boethius*, 254–314, extensively chart the rhythmical patterns pervading the poetry in *DcPh*.

<sup>52</sup> Robertson, *Lectio Divina*.

<sup>53</sup> Staal, *Rules without Meaning*, 182: "These [musical and ritual] structures do not mean anything apart from and beyond the structural complexities they display." In ch. 22, "Mantras and Language," 253–77, Staal argues that the phenomenon of the mantra precedes human language. It works without meaning anything.

redemption, or the Great Beyond.<sup>54</sup> When Relihan, Donato, and Blackwood have the *DcPh* put forward a Christian message, they do so by inference from its more or less open ending. If Boethius had intended his book to be a Christian manual to salvation, why did he not make this explicit?

Moreover, after the prisoner's desperate outcry regarding the pointlessness of praying to an abstract and indifferent Deity (5.pr3.33–36), Philosophy goes on to demonstrate the fundamental incongruity between divine and human perspectives, in effect confirming the prisoner's anxiety. Her unprepared summons to prayer at the end of Book 5 may even be read as a slap in the prisoner's face: pray, she says, it is the only thing left you can do. The previous discussion, however, implies that He will not respond, certainly not by altering the suppliant's circumstances.

In sum, *DcPh* may be written by a Christian author, but it is not a Christian book.

## 8 Cyclicity and circularity

In order to explain what makes *DcPh* such a discomfiting and unsettling work, I will first point to formal aspects that superficially appear to suggest its “edle Einfalt und stille Grösse,” making it a text of ‘classical’ balance and coherence. The book's beautiful cyclical composition clearly corresponds to both God's eternally perfect world order and the intentionally circular nature of Philosophy's reasoning in Book 3. I am not the first scholar to demonstrate the work's cyclical set-up, but I believe it to be even more ingenious than most scholars have seen.<sup>55</sup> The structure can be summarized in the following points:

1. The five books first increase in size, with the middle book as the longest, then to gradually become shorter.<sup>56</sup> Since Book 3 embodies the prisoner's intended ascent to *henosis*,<sup>57</sup> its dimensions correspond to its spiritual importance. Ethical questions dominate the discussion in Books 2 and 4. Both Books 1 and 5 deal with captivity and freedom: to Book 1 the prisoner's material circumstances are central, while the final book concentrates on the freedom of will and agency.

2. In the fourth prose passage of Book 1, the prisoner extensively dwells on his misfortunes (1.pr4). The only other passage which gives him the opportunity to take his time in expounding his views is 5.pr3, i.e. the fourth prose counted from the end.

<sup>54</sup> De Vogel, “Boethiana I,” “Boethiana II,” and Mohrmann, “Some Remarks on the Language of Boethius' *Consolatio Philosophiae*” both point to Christian elements in Boethius' style. The only Biblical quotation having gained some scholarly consensus is part of a sentence in 3.pr12.22, possibly referring to *Sapientia* 8:1; some scholars add the final words of *DcPh*, see footnote 74. The Afterlife is only mentioned in passing, in 4pr.4.22–23.

<sup>55</sup> Apart from Gruber's and Blackwood's analyses of the cycle of poems, see in particular Magee, “The Good and Morality,” 181–82. My analysis is based on my introduction to *Boëthius*, 28–30.

<sup>56</sup> In Moreschini's edition, the five books count 24, 29, 41, 35, and 26 pages respectively. The number of poems is 7, 8, 12, 7, and 5.

<sup>57</sup> *Henosis* (ἑνωσις) is the Neoplatonist term for becoming one with God or the One. See e.g. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, passim.

3. In the second prose passage of Book 2, Fortuna explains the mechanism of her wheel (2.pr2); in the penultimate prose of Book 4 (4.pr6.15), Philosophy propounds her theory of concentric circles rotating around the centre, which is the One (= God), in order to illustrate the difference between divine providence and fate.

4. This metaphysical position of the One is formally represented by the centre (counted in number of pages) of *DcPh*, where we find the hexametrical hymn to the One, which, like most hymns, can be demonstrated to be conceptually circular in itself.<sup>58</sup>

5. In the final prose passage of Book 3, the One is compared to the well-rounded sphere of compact Being described by Parmenides (3.pr12.37). Philosophy quotes both Parmenides and Plato to defend her method of circular reasoning, emphasizing that philosophical truths ought to be expressed in language imitating its content.

6. In thirteen poems, the perpetual cyclicity of cosmic processes like the seasons, the phases of the moon, the alternation of day and night, is praised;<sup>59</sup> the almost boring repetition of this motive may be seen as cyclic in itself.

To sum up, *DcPh*'s formal structure, corresponding to the structure of the universe and Philosophy's way of reasoning, may well be deemed an exemplar of "edle Einfalt und stille Größe": form and content seem to be one, while the theme is grand and lofty.

Understandably, however, the prisoner experiences this immovable coincidence of logic and metaphysics as a depressing labyrinth (3.pr12.30), i.e. a prison, and, like Icarus, he subsequently struggles to escape from Philosophy's steely conceptions.<sup>60</sup> Boethius' Roman audience must have remembered Daedalus' sculpted doors in the middle of Vergil's *Aeneid*: both Aeneas and the prisoner are desperately puzzled by enigmas they are not in a position to solve.<sup>61</sup> In addition, while Aeneas will descend into the Underworld in *Aeneid* 6, Boethius immediately inserts his poem on Orpheus' *katabasis*. Will the prisoner have an opportunity to escape? Unfortunately, in Books 4 and 5 the problematic nature of circular reasoning will not be made acceptable to him. And Orpheus, a poet like Boethius himself, will look back and forfeit his chance of salvation.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Analysis in Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius*, 275–76. Blackwood, *The Consolation of Boethius*, 147–48, rightly states that 3.m9 is not the middle poem, which should be the twentieth one; accordingly, in his view, 3.m5 (a cyclically structured poem) is the structural hub of the poetical cycle. Since the scope and content of this little *carmen* are far from impressive, I cannot believe Boethius meant it to be the centre of *DcPh*.

<sup>59</sup> 1.m2, 1.m3, 1.m5, 1.m6; 2.m3, 2.m8; 3.m1, 3.m2, 3.m6, 3.m9; 4.m1, 4.m5, 4.m6.

<sup>60</sup> While the labyrinth may symbolically represent the prisoner's captivity in his cell and in Philosophy's chains of logic, the cell itself may have a symbolic meaning as well, irrespective of Boethius' actual place of detention.

<sup>61</sup> The prisoner's formulation "inextricabilem labyrinthum" recalls Vergil's "inextricabilis error" (*Aeneid* 6.27, in Vergil, 228), modelled on Catullus' description of the labyrinth as "inobseruabilis error" (*Carmen* 64.115, in Catullus, 50).

<sup>62</sup> In 1.m1.2 the weeping prisoner sings sorrowful tunes ("flebilis heu maestos cogor inire modos"); Orpheus does the same in 3.m12.7 ("flebilibus modis").

## 9 Discrepancy between form and narrative

Let us confront the ‘unclassical’ elements of the book. The fact that *DcPh* explores a host of classical genres, ranging from elegy and forensic oratory to hymn and Aristotelian dialectic, makes it an encyclopedia of literary traditions,<sup>63</sup> a feature that could potentially undermine its unity. As said above, the multi-faceted nature of *DcPh* may not be exceptional in ancient literature and criticism,<sup>64</sup> but it does not help meet Aristotelian, Horatian, or Winckelmannian standards of classical simplicity.

The main reason, however, why Winckelmann’s “edle Einfalt” does not apply is the flagrant discrepancy between formal perfection and lack of narrative closure. I know of no other work from Greek or Latin literature in which this clash between form and content is as striking as in *DcPh*. Time and again the prisoner drives Philosophy into directions she would not have chosen herself.<sup>65</sup> She goes out of her way to argue for the justice of God’s system but does not succeed in convincing her interlocutor, although her dazzling logic appears to win the day. Eventually, the prisoner decides it is better not to respond at all than to bother someone who seems intent upon depriving him of any freedom to act and to think.<sup>66</sup> It may be impossible to refute her arguments, but making amends for what has happened to him would be something completely different.

In order to understand the impasse in which *DcPh* ends, it is important to look at its communicative structure.<sup>67</sup> We should distinguish four characters called Boethius:

B<sup>1</sup>: the author

B<sup>2</sup>: the first reader, i.e. Boethius as private audience of his own literary performance

B<sup>3</sup>: the narrator speaking in the first person singular

B<sup>4</sup>: the prisoner talking with, or listening to, Philosophy.

The structure could be schematized as follows, in which the outer brackets enclose the text of *DcPh*:

$$B^1 \rightarrow (B^3: (B^4 \leftrightarrow Ph)) \rightarrow B^2 + \text{wider audience}$$

<sup>63</sup> On intertextual hints and references to different genres, see Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius*, 14–46, and Shanzer, “Interpreting the *Consolation*.”

<sup>64</sup> Heath, *Unity in Greek Poetics*, passim. Contemporary parallels are Martianus Capella, *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* and Ennodius, *Paraenesis didascalica*. The date of composition of *De nuptiis* is not certain, but Ennodius’ work was published in 511 (Boethius and Ennodius knew each other quite well). See Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius*, 17–18.

<sup>65</sup> Most notably in the opening paragraph of 4.pr1. See Relihan, *The Prisoner’s Philosophy*, 15–33, following Marenbon.

<sup>66</sup> As noted above, the prisoner’s final contribution to the dialogue is 5.pr3.

<sup>67</sup> Today, most scholars see the importance to distinguish between Boethius the author, and ‘Boethius’ the prisoner. Donato does not, which results in an interpretation which leaves little room for irony, self-mockery, or inner conflict. The academic debate fails to clearly distinguish between the prisoner and the narrator.

In my view, Boethius (B<sup>1</sup>, the author) set out to console himself (B<sup>2</sup>, the first reader) by making use of every literary and philosophical tool he could find, meticulously constructing a compendium of classical wisdom and poetical wealth that would also be a pleasure to read for a future audience. His construction involved a narrator modelled on the author himself (B<sup>3</sup>), who records a real or dreamt<sup>68</sup> dialogue between himself (B<sup>4</sup>) with Philosophy, situated in the near past, including at least ten poems improvised by either the prisoner (B<sup>4</sup>) or Philosophy. One song (1.m3) is explicitly inserted by the narrator (B<sup>3</sup>), some songs may be imagined to be sung by Philosophy, but the majority, like choral odes in a tragedy,<sup>69</sup> seems to be supplied by the author (B<sup>1</sup>) resolved to complete his cyclical composition.

This well-balanced structure must have been Boethius' original design for the book. What happened next, in my reconstruction, is chilling. Up to the final prose section of Book 3, everything went well, Philosophy smoothly explaining away the toils of human existence as irrelevant seen from a divine perspective. But then (3.pr12.30) the author realized his philosophy's solution was a sham, since it did not remove the harm done to him. "Die Logik ist zwar unerschütterlich, aber einem Menschen der leben will, widersteht sie nicht," to quote once again Kafka's *Proceß*.<sup>70</sup> Ignoring his character Philosophy's proposal to intellectually become one with God, Boethius (B<sup>1</sup>) first tried to understand the nature of justice (Book 4), which did not help either, seeing that he would have to die while a bunch of thugs held sway at Theodoric's court. His last resort was to prove that, notwithstanding God's just and total governance, he had still some freedom to think, to decide, and to act (Book 5). It brought him, and the prisoner (B<sup>4</sup>), to a terrible Catch-22. One either had to resign oneself to the human perspective which, to be sure, granted some freedom to think but did not save one from Fortune's capriciousness; or one should take God's position, which was not only impossible but would restrict one's freedom even further, given God's timeless immobility and absolute prescience. In other words, the only way out was by assuming the viewpoint of Big Brother himself, which, to human beings, is fundamentally impossible.

When Boethius reached this conclusion, he decided not to recoil, but in writing it down he expressed its horror by silencing his dear character, the prisoner. The book ends in a stalemate. "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT," to quote the final words of Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991).<sup>71</sup> After Philosophy's last words, the

<sup>68</sup> The entrance of Philosophy in 1.pr1 is described in terms reminding the reader of divine epiphanies, the ultimate model of which are Homeric characters visited by gods in their dreams. Chadwick, *Boethius*, 225; Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius*, 62–63; Marenbon, *Boethius*, 153–54.

<sup>69</sup> Sung by the prisoner: 1.m1, 1.m5, 5.m3; by the narrator: 1.m3; by Philosophy: 1.m2, 1.m4, 3.m9, 3.m12, 4.m6, possibly 4.m7. All the other poems are conventionally attributed to Philosophy, but the text itself does not say so: their narratological status is ambiguous. Discussion of the different kinds of poems by Marenbon, *Boethius*, 146–53. As far as I know, the connections between *DcPh* and Attic tragedy have never been investigated seriously. Intertextual links with Seneca's choral odes are studied by O'Daly, *Poetry*, 76–79, 118–23, 128–31, 142–43, 193–99, 222–23, 226–34, and Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue*, passim, in particular 160–64, 191–93, 195–201, 221–25, 237–53 (overview of Senecan elements).

<sup>70</sup> "Logic may be unshakable, but it cannot withstand one who is determined to live," Kafka, *Proceß*, 214, the final page of the novel.

<sup>71</sup> Ellis, *American Psycho*, 399.



reader expects to hear one more song, maybe even a prayer, but all we hear is a telling, abysmal silence.<sup>72</sup>

My contention, then, would be that the blatant discrepancy between perfect formal beauty and staggering content as well as the horrific worldview by itself should remind us more of Kafka and Beckett than Sophocles and Thomas à Kempis. Its open ending is intentional. Contrary to current scholarship, I do not believe Boethius implicitly propagated Christianity by demonstrating ancient philosophy's failure. In fact, the opposite may be true. His work proves the sublime and austere superiority of Neoplatonist and Aristotelian metaphysics. The only problem is that this philosophy situates man, abandoned and vulnerable, in a desolate *selva oscura*.<sup>73</sup>

To show that my reference, above, to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not otiose, I point to the final words of *DcPh*: everything takes place under the eyes, Philosophy says, "iudicis cuncta cernentis" ("a judge who sees everything") – a magnificent, alliterating Ciceronian *clausula*.<sup>74</sup> Orwell's protagonist Winston Smith finally loves Big Brother:

He gazed up at the enormous face. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark moustache. O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast! Two gin-scented tears trickled down the sides of his nose. But it was alright, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.<sup>75</sup>

Boethius' prisoner, in contrast, does not appear to have learned to love his omniscient judge. Which does not prove, of course, that Boethius *the author* cannot have turned to God after having put down his pen (something I cannot believe). If so, he chose not to include that in his book. Accordingly, it is none of our business, since we are just readers of this actual text. In addition, we cannot rule out the possibility that the process of writing a beautiful, gripping book may have had a wholesome effect on the author. But again, that is only a matter of speculation.

<sup>72</sup> While Book 1 opens and ends with a poem and Books 2 through 4 open with dialogue and end with poems, Book 5 both opens and ends in dialogue. The symmetry of the work's composition makes us expect *DcPh* to be concluded by a poem.

<sup>73</sup> Chase, "Time and Eternity from Plotinus and Boethius to Einstein" compares Philosophy's lecture on time and timeless eternity with theories in twentieth-century physics. He even quotes a letter by Einstein, who refers to the non-existence of time in physical theory in order to console a friend at the occasion of the loss of a loved one. For Einstein, "ultimate reality is eternal, and time—a mere illusion," 71. Rovelli, *L'Ordine del tempo*, 100–101, is certainly right in placing Einstein's statement in its context of consolatory rhetoric, which may raise some doubt as to how sincerely the scientist believed his statements to be comforting to the bereaved.

<sup>74</sup> 5.pr6.48. The stylistic device makes the phrase a perfect ending to the work. On rhythmic patterns at the close of Latin sentences (*clausulae*), see Dräger, "Klausel," 1088–1104. For Cicero's *clausulae*, Berry, "The value of prose rhythm in questions of authenticity." Boethius' *clausula* consists in two cretics and a spondee. The phrase may be an allusion to the book of Esther (16:4: "Dei [...] cuncta cernentis"), see Relihan, *The Prisoner's Philosophy*, 42–43. In his view, Philosophy intends the allusion to be consolatory, as the scriptural passage is about God punishing evildoers. After the preceding discussion, however, this would be a very poor piece of comfort.

<sup>75</sup> Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 311.

## 10 Conclusion

Although literature from Classical Antiquity does not typically conform to Aristotelian standards of unity, coherence, and closure, the Stagirite's influence on western literary criticism has been profound. This tradition of critical thinking was ineradicably confirmed by Winckelmann's *Gedancken*. Twentieth-century Modernism may have shown different ways of representing human existence in art and literature, but Aristotelian views still appear to loom large in classical scholarship.

One of 'Winckelmann's victims' is Boethius' *De consolazione Philosophiae*, a cherished classic usually interpreted as a serious and more or less successful attempt to offer consolation to people in existential trouble. This paper aimed to demonstrate that an analysis of the work from an unclassical, modernist perspective may yield an interpretation more in line with the text's actual nature, hitherto either ignored or seen as problematic. Central to my new view is the heartrending discrepancy between the work's perfect formal structure on the one hand, and its faltering chains of argumentation (from the end of Book 3) and lack of narrative closure (in the second half of Book 5), on the other. I hope to have shown that my interpretation enhances the greatness of Boethius' swan song.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *DcPh* has often been compared to Plato's *Phaedo*, in which Socrates serenely drinks the cup of hemlock to die as a martyr for his philosophical principles. In this dialogue, Socrates refers to the legendary songs of swans realizing they are about to die. Plato, *Phaedo* 84e3–85b7.

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