

THE IMAGINATIVE STRATEGY OF BOETHIUS

Riz Crescini on the Apologetic Power of the
Imagination

Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*, though less well known today, was extremely influential in the Middle Ages. Through the late Middle Ages, reason and imagination were firmly integrated in the medieval mind. It cannot be emphasized enough that this integration creates a much richer, deeper, engaging, and a more incarnational way to think and communicate about ideas. *The Consolation* was an integrated book and, as such, represented many medieval works of literature. In a post-modern and increasingly pagan world, today's cultural apologist can improve his presentation of Christian ideas by analyzing Boethius's imaginative approach, especially in his use of dialogue, image, and poetry.

It will be helpful to briefly define imagination and why the imaginative approach is every bit as important as the rational approach. According to Holly Ordway, "Imagination is the human faculty

that assimilates sensory data into images, upon which the intellect can act; it is the basis of all reasoned thought."¹ Reason cannot function without imagination. Truth is discerned by reason, but it is the imagination that makes truth meaningful. C.S. Lewis explains, "Reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition."² There is a distinction between imagination and reason, but it is a collaborative distinction; one faculty cannot do without the other. In a work of philosophy like *The Consolation*, the rational approach is an approach assumed by many, but it is the imaginative approach that sets it apart from other philosophical works.

The first imaginative strategy of which to take note is the dialectical dialogue that Boethius sets up as a framework for a discussion of his ideas. This dialectical dialogue between Boethius and Lady Philosophy is very fascinating. The literary style of

¹ Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2017), 16.

² C.S. Lewis, "Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare," in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 265.

conversation that Boethius uses is, in a sense, a consolation itself. It is a consolation from self-introspection, a comfort from engaging in heavy material to one of light dialogue. When a person is heavy with grief and in too much introspection, a dialogue with a sympathetic ear can make a world of difference. Boethius's style of dialogue with a wise individual is an effective and soul-revitalizing one. He could have written a philosophical treatise on these deep issues, but instead, he uses dialogue which makes the audience perk up and pay attention.

There are several aspects of Boethius's dialogue itself that are instructive. First, one sees that compassion accompanies dialogue. Lady Philosophy did not immediately provide him an explanation for his suffering. It is enough, initially, to show to a person in pain that he is not alone. Boethius notes, "Then she approached the edge of my cot and sat. Looking at my face, worn with grief and dejected with sorrow, she bitterly mourned my mind's confusion."³ Boethius further observes, "When she saw that I was not just silent but totally speechless and completely unable to talk, she gently laid her

³ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Scott Goins and Barbara H. Wyman (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 8.

hand upon my breast . . . she folded her gown, and with it wiped my tear-filled eyes."⁴ This is reminiscent of Job's friends at the beginning of their visit. The author of Job writes, "They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him. . . . And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great."⁵ The apologist must exercise Christian care in his conversations. His actions and words must go through this filter of compassion.

Another aspect of Boethius's dialogue and something that cannot be overstated is the importance of prayer. Prayer must undergird conversation. Boethius says,

But since we ought to pray for divine aid even in the least things, as our Plato says in the *Timaeus*, what do you think we should do when we are looking for the foundation of the highest Good? We should call upon the Father of all things. If

⁴ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 10.

⁵ Job 2:11,13.

we leave this out, we can't make a proper beginning for our work.⁶

The apologist agrees with Lady Philosophy when she prays, "Permit my spirit to rise - / and grant light to my mind / that I might fix clear sight on You, / Source of all good."⁷ To neglect prayer in the work of apologetics is to be prideful. Prayer keeps the apologist humble and admits his dependence on God. Being an apologist is not a show of one's abilities but a show of God's calling on the apologist's life as He empowers the apologist to defend and share the Christian faith. Lewis, in his prayer poem for apologists, writes, "Thoughts are but coins. Let me not trust, instead / Of Thee, their thin-worn image of Thy head. . . . Lord of the narrow gate and the needle's eye, / Take from me all my trumpery lest I die."⁸

One other aspect of Boethius's dialogue that is important to consider is patience. Lady Philosophy does not go in for the kill and tells Boethius what he must do to overcome his suffering: to get rid of his lethargy. She takes the time to listen to him and to

⁶ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 85.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, "The Apologist's Evening Prayer," in *Poems*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperOne, 2017) 198.

have a clear understanding of his ailment. Likening herself to a doctor, Lady Philosophy says, "But now it's time for you to drink down some medicine that's pleasant and good, to make the way for stronger remedies . . . Let us sing out, first in a light measure, then in a heavier one."⁹ And as Boethius begins to gain insight into his condition, Lady Philosophy says, "But since the medicines of my argument have begun to work on you, I think I'll use some cures that are a little stronger."¹⁰ Apologists can be guilty of a now-or-never or swinging-for-the-fences approach in defending the faith. In doing so, the apologist dehumanizes the person by treating that person as a sales project; a quota to be met. Gregory Koukl has a more humane approach. He shares, "All I want to do is put a stone in someone's shoe. I want to give him something worth thinking about, something he can't ignore because it continues to poke at him in a good way."¹¹ So the apologist's job is to plant seeds and to leave it to God and His care for that seed to grow and flourish. This requires patience as Lady Philosophy showed in her dialogue with Boethius.

⁹ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹¹ Gregory Koukl, *Tactics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 38.

Another imaginative strategy employed by Boethius is the abundant use of images. Evil, for example, is a sickness. Boethius describes it as such, "Wickedness is a sort of disease of the soul, just as weakness is a disease of the body."¹² Boethius likens himself to a patient and Lady Philosophy to a physician. This analogy is evident when she says to him, "You can't expect the benefits of treatment if you won't uncover your wound?"¹³ And as any doctor that would state the benefit of medicine, Lady Philosophy says, "Indeed the remedies that await you are bitter when tasted but become all the more sweet when they are swallowed down deep."¹⁴ Furthermore, Boethius uses the image of home and exile to describe his lethargy. In his pain, he is like one who is very far from home. Even though he is physically and literally far from his home, Lady Philosophy paints a different picture of his banishment. The barbarian king was not the only one that banished Boethius, but Boethius, in fact, banished himself. She tells him, "Indeed how far from your native land you are . . . you should realize you've banished yourself. For in your case, such a

¹² Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 128.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

banishment is something only you could do, not someone else."¹⁵ Lady Philosophy encourages Boethius to return to her, for she is his true home. She explains, "If you would just remember what country you are from, not one ruled like Athens by the power of many, but one in which 'there is one ruler and one king' . . . I miss my seat of honor in your mind."¹⁶

Perhaps, the greatest example of image used in *The Consolation* is the image of Lady Philosophy herself. She is a personification of philosophy. Boethius describes her as follows:

She had a holy look, and her eyes showed fire and pierced with a more-than-human penetration. One could hardly guess her age; her face was vital and glowing, yet she seemed too full of years to belong to this generation. Her height was hard to tell; at one moment it was that of any ordinary human, but at another she seemed to strike the clouds with the crown of her head. Indeed, when she lifted her head higher, she could no longer be seen by mortal eyes.¹⁷

¹⁵ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25-6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

Boethius's use of images as anthropomorphized characterizations of abstract concepts like philosophy is very helpful. Through such a strategy, Boethius is able to present the philosophy found within the pages of *The Consolation* in a more digestible form. Apologists can learn this technique of presenting propositional work from Boethius that is not only unique and refreshing but also meaningful. Lewis wrote in an essay, "I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition . . . Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could."¹⁸ Boethius used image to sneak past those dragons that inhibit people from making meaning of philosophical ideas.

Lastly, Boethius incorporates poetry as part of his imaginative strategy. Poetry is used in *The Consolation* as means of renewing Boethius's vision; to get him to remember who he is. It was this loss of vision that led Boethius to behave lower than an animal. Lady Philosophy observes, "But that same human nature is reduced to being lower than the beasts if it ceases to know itself . . . such ignorance proves to be a vice in man."¹⁹ So, Boethius must rise

¹⁸ C.S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said," in *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 58.

¹⁹ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 49.

above his biological imperative, and poetry is the imaginative ladder that he ascends. Malcolm Guite tells his readers "that poetry, and more widely the poetic imagination, is truth-bearing; that it offers . . . the redress of an imbalance in our vision of the world and ourselves."²⁰ Poetry, Boethius believed, is the medium that expresses the deepest truths man needs to know about himself.

Boethius took advantage of verses in order to boost his philosophical message. In several metrum, the philosophical concepts are spotlighted with examples from mythology. For example, in the discussion of the nature of happiness, Boethius warns it is not found in false goods. To make this point he includes the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in metrum 12. It reads, "Orpheus his own Eurydice / saw, lost, and killed. / This story is for you, / for those who wish to lead / the mind into the upper day."²¹ Poetry enhances and gives the reader a different way of understanding what was written in prose; its role is that of a handmaiden.

²⁰ Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1.

²¹ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 108.

Thus, today's apologist should emulate Boethius's overall use of imagination to convey a philosophical idea. Boethius teaches the apologist that overloading the minds of readers with propositional arguments is not necessary when writing on theological and philosophical topics. Boethius's imaginative strategy is quite effective in reaching others on a profound level especially on difficult topics involving fate and evil. This synthesis of imagination with reason is, to a great degree, missing in contemporary society. It is up to apologists, if they are up to the task, of creating such work.

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