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*The Consolation of Philosophy vs. the Consolation of Beatrice*

Upon reading *La Vita Nova*, a striking similarity between it and another work that famously pondered human identity and purpose becomes apparent. Dante’s *Vita Nova* bears an obvious likeness to Boethius’ 6th century *Consolation of Philosophy* in form, structure, tone, themes, and rhetorical strategy. However, *Vita Nova* differs on a very significant point from *Consolation of Philosophy*. Dante diverges from Boethius in his expressed attitude towards philosophy as a means of discerning his own purpose and meaning of existence.

The influence of Boethius’ *Consolation* is apparent throughout many of Dante’s works, especially *Vita Nova*. Being among the most widely read texts in the Middle Ages, Dante undoubtedly was exposed to it. According to Angelo Gualtieri, in his essay “Lady Philosophy in Boethius and Dante,” there are “not less than ten specific references made to Boethius in the *Convivio*, while copious allusions to the philosopher’s work can be found in all of Dante’s compositions.” (Gualtieri, p. 141) Dante also specifically mentions having read and mimicked Boethius after his love, Beatrice, passed away. In another work, *Convivio*, Dante writes that in his grief and despondence, he “resolved to resort to a method which a certain disconsolate individual had adopted” and “began to read that book of Boethius’.” (*Convivio*, ch. 12)

It is clear that Boethius’ influence is present in much, if not all, of Dante’s work. *Vita Nova* is one such text, though unlike *Convivio* or *Divine Comedy*, Dante does not specifically
mention the philosopher. *Vita Nova’s* underlying references to *Consolation of Philosophy* lie in its similarity of form, theme and the use of the same allegorical personification.

Generally, the structure of *Vita Nova* echoes the composition of *Consolation*, both being written in prosimetrical form. Each author intentionally alternates between prose and verse throughout the entirety of the books, making them unique in themselves, but similar to each other. Also reminiscent of Boethius, Dante is seeking consolation and direction in his life after a traumatic experience. Though Boethius is attempting to find an explanation for his wrongful imprisonment and death sentence, and Dante consolation for the death of Beatrice, they both explore the meaning and purpose of life and the values that shape it. Consequently, the two men also contemplate weaker forms of consolation until they come to the realization of their “true” consolation.

Besides these, one of the most evident examples of Boethius’ influence on *Vita Nova* is Dante’s personification of philosophy. Gualtieri states that Dante’s portrayal of Lady Philosophy was so reminiscent of Boethius’ that “in order to fully understand and appreciate Dante’s thought it is imperative that we keep in mind the role that this allegorical figure plays in Boethius’ *Consolatio.*” (Gualtieri, p. 150) However, the main divergence between Dante’s *Vita Nova* and Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* arises with the differing uses of this rhetorical device and their expressed attitudes towards this personified “Lady Philosophy,” as said above.

Throughout the *Consolation of Philosophy*, the main rhetorical strategy that Boethius employs is his personification of philosophy as Lady Philosophy. He presents the study of reason, logic, and the overall power of the mind as a woman who appears and consoles him
in his darkest hour. In this way he shows his progression from wallowing in self-pity to his realization of the triumph of the mind through the teachings of Philosophy.

At the start of *Consolation*, Boethius is enshrouded in confusion and his own self-pity. Philosophy comments, “Alas! In what abyss his mind is plunged!” (*Consolation*, p.14) Boethius sits “mutely pondering within myself and recording sorrowful complaints.” (p. 11) In his state of depression over his fate, he begins to contemplate the existence of God and the sense of justice in the world, asking, “If God exists, whence comes evil?” (p.28) and “Had I deserved this by my way of life?”. (p. 25) However, amid his pitiable state, Boethius finds answers in the use of philosophy and reason, expressed metaphorically by the appearance and teachings of Lady Philosophy.

It is only through the help of Lady Philosophy that Boethius is able to find the answers to his questions and, above all, accept his fate of death. Boethius has an overwhelmingly positive attitude towards philosophy. He asserts that philosophy is the only true way to understand the world and divine the purpose of humans and God.

Dante also mimics Boethius’ use of the personification of Lady Philosophy. In chapter XXXV of *Vita Nova* Dante writes of how he “saw a gracious lady, young and very beautiful” and how he saw in “that compassionate lady there is most noble Love.” (*Vita Nova*, p. 71) This “compassionate lady” is not specifically identified in *Vita Nova*; however, Dante tells us in *Convivio* that she is none other than the personification of philosophy. In *Convivio* Dante writes that after the passing of Beatrice he turned to the consolation of Lady Philosophy, as Boethius had some eight centuries prior.

Contrary to Boethius, however, who is straightforward in expressing his love, admiration, and respect for philosophy through his personification, Dante’s use of the
allegory of Lady Philosophy is more complex. It is more difficult to interpret Dante’s attitude towards philosophy since he expresses mixed feelings towards this personification. This is in stark contrast to Boethius, who never at any point during Consolation conveys uncertainty in the greatness of Philosophy. Boethius uses this personification to portray philosophy as a woman of great wisdom, power, and compassion, thus representing his belief in the greatness of the discipline. Dante, though clearly imitating Boethius’ use of this rhetorical device, does not share Boethius’ unswerving embrace of Philosophy.

Though Dante’s personification of Lady Philosophy is immediately recognizable as reminiscent of Boethius’, this use of the personification differs from the one in Consolation. Whereas Boethius gives Lady Philosophy the role of teacher and nurse, Dante represents Philosophy as a love affair. Through chapters XXXV to XXXIX Dante details how he met and became infatuated with this Lady Philosophy. This seemingly small change in roles is crucial to examining the difference between Dante and Boethius’ views of the study of Philosophy.

Dante writes of love as an inherently positive and sacred thing throughout Vita Nova, but he describes his affair with Philosophy as more of an infatuation rather than true love. He writes that the feelings that overcame him when he would “see” this woman were “almost like that of love.” (Vita Nova, p. 73) He never touts his love for Philosophy to the extent of which he does for Beatrice, showing that it is considerably less meaningful. While Boethius writes of learning and gaining health and strength from philosophy, Dante’s description of his encounter with philosophy is one that is unhealthy, revolving around “infatuation.”
In chapter XXXVIII, Dante also writes, “the appearance of this lady brought about in me such a strange condition that I would reason as one does who is infatuated.” (Vita Nova, p.76) In this case the infatuation is not only something different than love, but also something that corrupts Dante’s mind. Boethius writes of Philosophy as clearing his mind rather than clouding it further. In *Consolation*, Boethius describes how Lady Philosophy “dried my eyes all swimming with tears. Then the gloom of night was scattered, sight returned unto mine eyes.” (*Consolation*, p. 17) Boethius uses the personification of philosophy to convey the clearing of his mind to see reason and logic. However, Dante employs this personification to suggest the confusion and corruption with which he viewed an infatuation with philosophy.

This contrast between a patient being nursed and one who is infatuated illuminates the difference between Boethius and Dante’s views of Philosophy. The act of being nursed back to health carries the connotation of being inherently positive. The image of a nurse is that of one who normally has an effect of well-being on a person. However, a love affair, especially one that is referred to as an infatuation, carries the stigma of having a potentially negative effect on the subject. The object of the infatuation has the possibility to bring about both happiness and harm on the person who is infatuated. This seemingly subtle difference is an apt allegory for the divergence between Boethius’ apparent admiration and Dante’s more ambiguous outlook towards philosophy.

While Dante describes his affair with Philosophy as an indiscretion that was detrimental to his mental and spiritual health, Boethius depicts essentially the opposite. At the start of *Consolation* Boethius is rebuked by Lady Philosophy for being fooled into involvement with the muses of poetry. While he wallows in grief and self-pity, he describes
being guided by poetry rather than rationale. He writes then that as Lady Philosophy "saw the muses of poetry at my bedside, dictating the words of my lamentations, she was moved awhile to wrath, and her eyes flashed sternly." (Consolation, p.11) She rebukes the muses, telling them to "leave him for my muses to tend and heal!" (p. 14) She then turns to Boethius and scolds him, asking, “Dost thou know me? Why art thou silent? Is it shame or amazement that hath struck thee dumb?” (p.16)

Dante’s depiction of Beatrice’s rebuke in both Vita Nova and again in Purgatory is practically a mirror image of this episode. Canto XXX line 73 reads “Look here! For I am Beatrice, I am!” (Purgatorio, p. 283) at which point Dante is overcome with shame and cannot speak but only look down. However, in Dante’s case the roles are significantly reversed. It is Beatrice who chastises Dante for being misled by Philosophy.

Further revelation of Dante’s ambiguous, and often negative, feelings towards Philosophy in Vita Nova appear in chapters XXXV to XXXIX, during which he is embattled in a constant inner-struggle in response to his encounter with Lady Philosophy. Dante shows that he feels he is engaging in a negative act by revealing his conflicted state of mind during his encounters with Philosophy. Instead of feeling consoled by Philosophy, Dante maintains that he “felt very contemptible.” He says that he “often became angry with myself” and “battled within myself so many times.” (Vita Nuova, p. 74) Never once does Dante portray Philosophy as an inherently good love affair. This is in stark contrast to Boethius who never once portrays Philosophy as having a single negative effect.

Besides his own conflict within himself, Dante expresses his conflicted views towards this “new lady” by describing Beatrice’s reaction to his love affair, in both Vita Nova and the Divine Comedy. Dante ends his affair with Philosophy after a vision of Beatrice
in Chapter XXXIX of *Vita Nova*. In this chapter, he sees an apparition of Beatrice, remembers her, and writes that his “heart began remorsefully to repent of the desire by which it had so unworthily let itself be possessed for some time.” (p.78) At this point Dante completely diverges from Boethius, dispelling any doubt in the reader’s mind that philosophy may have been a positive infatuation. He writes, “Once I had rejected this evil desire, all my thoughts turned back to their most gracious Beatrice.” (p.78) Dante goes so far as to refer to his affair with Philosophy as an “evil desire and empty temptation” that the sight of Beatrice subsequently vanquishes. (*Vita Nuova*, p. 78)

Dante goes even further to depict Beatrice’s view of his wayward relationship in Canto XXX of *Purgatory* in the *Divine Comedy*. When he sees Beatrice for the first time descending from heaven, she looks at him and, as in *Vita Nova*, Dante feels “such shame” that he is forced to look away. When the angels, according to Dante, seem to say “Lady, why shame him so?” Beatrice begins a long rebuke against the affair that deluded him. She starts by describing his potential, prior to the affair saying, “He, when young, was such-potentially- that any propensity innate in him would have prodigiously succeeded, had he acted.” (*Purgatorio*, Canto XXX, vv. 114-117 p. 285) Beatrice then goes on to depict and denounced Dante’s indiscretion in this way:

“**My countenance sustained him for a while; showing my youthful eyes to him, I led him with me toward the way of righteousness. As soon as I, upon the threshold of my second age, had changed my life, he took himself away from me and followed after another; when, from flesh to spirit, I had risen, and my goodness and my beauty had grown, I was less dear to him, less welcome: he turned his footsteps toward an untrue path; he followed counterfeits of goodness, which will never pay in full what they have promised.**“ (*Purgatorio*, Canto XXX, vv. 121-132 p. 285)
Beatrice’s rebuke of Dante’s actions after her death shows that Dante himself disproved of his own decision and saw the affair as a lapse in judgment. In this way he shows the difference between his own view of philosophy and Boethius’. The fact that Dante uses Beatrice to essentially condemn Philosophy firmly establishes Beatrice’s superiority over her, and allegorically, over the field of study. The rebuke thus creates a concrete distinction between Beatrice and Philosophy and consequently between the *Vita Nova* and *The Consolation of Philosophy* and Dante’s and Boethius’ attitudes towards this discipline.

However, it is not clear that Dante sees philosophy in itself as a singularly negative discipline. In fact, he shows in much of his works that he retains an immense respect for many of those who have practiced it, Boethius included. As Angelo Gualtieri states, “Dante’s admiration for Boethius is unquestionable.” (p. 141) Undoubtedly Dante, being an exile himself while writing *Divine Comedy*, saw a kindred spirit and hero in Boethius. Gualtieri cites “the mere flattering reference to him in *Paradiso*” as “sufficient proof of this fact.” (Gualtieri, p.141) During his journey through paradise, Dante encounters Boethius in heaven, which in itself is high praise. Dante encounters many of his mentors, teachers and even friends on his journey that are not granted entrance into paradise. Not only does Dante maintain that Boethius is placed firmly in the heaven of the sun, but he also writes in praise of him:

“because he saw the Greatest Good, rejoices the blessed soul who makes the world’s deceit plain to all who hear him carefully. The flesh from which his soul was banished lies below, within Ciel dauro, and he came from martyrdom and exile to this peace.” (*Paradiso*, Canto X, vv. 124-129 p. 91)
Dante also shows great respect and admiration for another ancient philosopher and poet, Virgil. He regards Virgil as a mentor, friend, and guide throughout *Divine Comedy*. Obviously with these and other positive references to philosophers and their studies, Dante’s attitude towards philosophy could not have been one of total disdain. The question then arises as to why he would maintain such harsh criticisms of philosophy in *Vita Nova* and *Divine Comedy* when he clearly admired those who were considered to be the founders of the subject.

The answer lies in his use of personification. Taking Boethius’ example a step further, Dante personifies not only philosophy, but theology as well, thus illuminating the main difference between Boethius and Dante as philosophers. As stated above, Dante makes a clear distinction between Lady Philosophy and Beatrice. This distinction between Beatrice and Lady Philosophy is an important one, which Dante uses to differentiate between faith and philosophy.

Beatrice, besides serving to teach and guide Dante, also acts as the personification of faith. He goes to great lengths throughout the whole of *Vita Nova* to stress Beatrice’s perfection, in beauty and soul. He describes her as beautiful, being “the highest nature can achieve.” More often than depicting her physical beauty, however, Dante exults in the praise of her soul. He also often calls her an angel, saying “Heaven, that lacks its full perfection only in lacking her” and that in Beatrice, “on earth is seen a living miracle.” (*Vita Nuova*, p. 35-36) As Mark Musa states in his introduction to *Vita Nuova*, “Dante’s meaning is unmistakable: Beatrice is a miracle and she is like Christ.” (Musa, p. xv) Rather than portraying Beatrice as a mere woman or the object of his affection, which she undoubtedly was, he describes her as divine and angelic, transcending her humanity.
Furthering the allegory of Beatrice as faith, Dante portrays her often as telling him that the path to God is achievable only through her. As Beatrice says in Purgatory, “I led him with me toward the way of righteousness.” (Purgatorio, Canto XXX, vv. 122-3 p. 285) Rather than stating outright that faith is the guidance that should be followed, Dante substitutes the person of Beatrice, who says that Dante “took himself away from me and followed after another.” (Canto XXX, vv. 125-7 p. 285) In this rebuke Dante also implies that Beatrice stands for something more than his love, as does the person of Lady Philosophy. In this way he shows that not only is there a conflict between Beatrice and Lady Philosophy, but also establishes Beatrice as the personification of faith, thus differentiating between faith and philosophy.

This juxtaposition between Beatrice and Philosophy represents the main difference between Dante and Boethius as philosophers. Whereas Boethius thought that true happiness, and most importantly, the path to God, could be achieved by means of philosophy, rather than thought and contemplation alone, Dante felt that philosophy could not reach divinity. Through his use of the personification of philosophy, in Lady Philosophy, and faith, in Beatrice, he maintains that while philosophy can take you to a certain understanding, one has to rely on faith alone to reach heaven.

Further evidence for this is Dante’s use of the character Virgil in Divine Comedy. Virgil, who was a pagan philosopher and writer, saves Dante from his “shadowed forest” (Inferno, Canto I, vv. 2) and serves as his guide through Inferno and Purgatory. In Canto I of Inferno, Virgil tells Dante, “follow me, and I shall guide you, taking you from this place through an eternal place.” (Inferno, Canto I, vv. 113-4) From then on he is Dante’s mentor and friend, guiding him from the bottom of Inferno to the top of Mt. Purgatory. However,
Virgil disappears as they reach earthly Paradise, as he warns Dante he would in *Inferno*; “if you would then ascend as high as these, a soul more worthy than I am will guide you.” Virgil describes his reasons for not entering Paradiso as thus, “that Emperor who reigns above, since I have been rebellious to His law, will not allow me entry to His city.” He thus tells Dante that God will not allow him to enter heaven. (p. 9)

Since Virgil, being a pagan, was not exposed to the Christian faith, he was unable to rely on faith in his life. Thus, he, as did many of the other figures Dante encounters for classical antiquity, relied solely on philosophy and rational thought to understand the universe. This is why throughout *Divine Comedy*, Dante shows that there are certain places that Virgil is unable to enter or to guide Dante through. For example, in Canto IX of *Purgatory* Dante uses the image of St. Lucy in the body of an eagle to illustrate his point. As he lies sleeping with Virgil before entering Purgatory he has what he believes to be a dream or vision of a flaming eagle. When he wakes he finds himself at the base of Purgatory with St. Lucy who says of Virgil, “let me take hold of him who is asleep that I may help to speed him on his way.” (*Purgatorio*, Canto IX, vv. 55-57, p. 79) This is yet another example of how Dante maintains that Virgil cannot reach certain places by himself. Dante can only reach Purgatory by the aid of grace, personified by St. Lucy. He once again needs the help of someone divine, above Virgil.

Virgil is also, as stated above, not allowed to enter Heaven. As Virgil leaves, Beatrice is the worthy guide who leads Dante from Purgatory to Paradise. As he presents Beatrice as the personification of faith, this is another allegory for faith being necessary to reach God. Virgil is unable to reach God, thus Dante emphasizes that philosophy can only be taken to a
certain extent. Only with the guidance of Beatrice, or more generally, faith, can man hope to reach heaven and divine understanding.

This is contrary to Boethius who reaches his own divine understanding with the help of philosophy alone, by means of contemplation. Lady Philosophy tells him at the conclusion of *Consolation* that they have come to full consolation by way of rational thought, saying, “we lately proved, everything that is known is cognized not in accordance with its own nature, but in accordance with the nature of the faculty that comprehends it.” *(Consolation, p. 240)* She goes on to say, “let us now contemplate, as far as is lawful, the character of the Divine essence, that we may be able to understand also the nature of its knowledge.” *(Consolation, p. 240)* Boethius continually references rational thought and logic to justify the will and existence of God and moral standards. Boethius establishes himself as a religious man in *Consolation*, stating multiple times his belief in God. However, he comes to this belief not through faith but through philosophy. He states, “God is eternal; in this judgment all rational beings agree.” *(Consolation, p.240)* He does not, as Dante does, say that faith has brought him to this conclusion. In reference to the theology of both men, Gualtieri comments, “While Boethius reaches the contemplation of God through philosophical speculation, Dante has to make use of theology as well.” *(Gualtieri, p. 145)* In essence, the main difference between Dante and Boethius’ theology is that Boethius’ soul is saved by philosophy, and Dante’s by faith.

Confers Gualtieri, “whereas in Boethius this lady (philosophy) by herself is able to elevate the soul up to God, in Dante theology, in the person of Beatrice, must take over from philosophy if the trip toward God is to be accomplished.” *(Gualtieri, p.147)* This marks the main divergence from *Consolation* that Dante makes in *Vita Nova*. Though they can both be
considered very similar works in regards to many facets of their themes, composition, and rhetorical strategies, Dante disagrees strongly with Boethius on this significant point. This difference in their views on philosophy and how it can be used to effect theology is one that Dante develops throughout his other works as well. In *Divine Comedy* and *Convivio* especially, Dante strategically emphasizes the importance of faith over philosophy. The pivotal difference between these two poets appears when Boethius entrusts his soul to the *Consolation of Philosophy*, and Dante to the Consolation of Beatrice.

Works Cited


