

Stephen Blackwood's *The Consolation of Boethius as Poetic Liturgy* (2015)

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INTRODUCTION

Stephen Blackwood's *The Consolation of Boethius as Poetic Liturgy*¹ (2015) is to be celebrated as a revolutionary handbook of philosophical pedagogy. It suggests a viable alternative to the contemporary liberal arts' exhausted liberal-democratic paradigm. It is also a lively work of Christian Neoplatonic practical ethics. This ethics revolves around prayer as the mediating activity that, in Boethius' thinking, helps us find contemplative rest in God.

It manages to be both of these things by also being an interactive primer in poetic metre. We should rejoice to encounter a book that begins philosophy by clapping our hands. *Poetic Liturgy* calls us into a divine earthly dance and a sober ecstasy.

Poetic Liturgy is not a "disciplinary" text in the modern academic sense. It includes philosophy, literature, history, music theory, personal contemplation, and even elements of the epistolary. It treats none of these as "disciplines" and does not fully identify with any of them.

Instead it proposes a different kind of discipline. It is to be practiced, not "read." Like Pierre Hadot, Blackwood construes philosophy as a way of life unifying corporeal and intellectual *asceses*. *Against* Hadot, Blackwood does not oppose philosophy to religion. *Poetic Liturgy* is positively theurgical, throwing new light on Christian liturgy and philosophical pedagogy.

Its preliminary "note to readers" on Latin and English poetic metre, for example, is not just a reading aid. It inaugurates the book's own *ascesis*. Tapping out the rhythm of "A Visit from Saint Nicholas," we really begin the discipline of attentive listening. We prepare to contemplate *and* generate the *Consolation's* poetic rhythms. Moreover, Blackwood treats attentive listening as itself salvific both in the *Consolation* and, through the *Consolation*, for

1. Hereafter referred to "*Poetic Liturgy*".

us. *Poetic Liturgy* represents the *Consolation's* rhythmic ascent to the Divine and, more fundamentally, works to actualize the ascent in us.

Yet I am not entirely certain that Boethius' *Consolation* and Blackwood's *Poetic Liturgy* share one purpose. For Boethius, "human souls are indeed at their freest *when they preserve themselves intact within the contemplation of the divine mind*; but they are less free when they fall away toward bodies, and still less free when they are tied to the limbs of earthly matter."² Human freedom ultimately consists in contemplative unity with God, *in whom we live, move, and have our being*. Mediating prayer is the means; however, it consists in motion, whereas the soul seeks *rest*.

Blackwood richly rethinks pedagogy, philosophy, prayer, and liturgy. There is much to learn from, and to practice, in *Poetic Liturgy*. Yet, it never *quite* identifies its purpose with the *Consolation's*. Rather than finding its end in simple unity with God, *Poetic Liturgy* closes with "Philosophy gather[ing] the metres of the ancient world and mak[ing] of them a single divine song, a poetic liturgy that heals both body and soul."³ From this vantage, it seems that *Poetic Liturgy* rather emphasizes what freedom can be found in motion. I will consider this apparent divergence again at the end; here, I turn to the text.

METHOD: "TEXTS FOR THE EAR"

Blackwood proposes that the *Consolation's* repetitive, variegated metres fundamentally structure its salvific operation.⁴ He salutes numerous scholars who have treated the *Consolation* literarily,⁵ particularly Joachim Gruber. Gruber's *Kommentar zu Boethius, De Consolatione Philosophiae* (2006) catalogues the *Consolation's* various poetic metres. Gruber's work helps the author and the reader: his *Kommentar's* metric tables appear in Appendix B.

Blackwood is the first, however, to examine the *Consolation's* poetry as *philosophically-liturgically functional*. Even Gruber "rarely ventures beyond simply classifying and naming the metres."⁶ Thus,

2. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Joel Relihan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001),

3. *Poetic Liturgy*, 243.

4. *Poetic Liturgy*, xii.

5. *Poetic Liturgy*, 6 n6.

6. Blackwood, *Poetic Liturgy*, 31.

in a space of general agreement about the *Consolation's* literary and salvific character, *Poetic Liturgy* opens a new perspective. That perspective persuades because it respects the "aurality" of Boethius' world. For Boethius, hearing co-inheres with intellect in a way rather foreign to our hyper-visual age.

This difference between ancient-medieval and modern sensibilities creates difficulties for modern readers. In Beothius' *De institutione musica*, for example, music is better studied theoretically than practically.⁷ This can be counterintuitive in our electrically-saturated modern world:

Music, we imagine, is something heard, rather than quietly contemplated; a book, by contrast, is something quietly contemplated rather than heard aloud. But although modern readers are accustomed to reading silently, in antiquity and until well into the Middle Ages books were typically read aloud, either to oneself or to others. The encounter with a work of literature was, therefore, primarily an acoustic rather than a visual activity, and principally a matter of hearing and listening rather than what we call 'reading.'⁸

Our modern sensibility, Blackwood suggests, contributes to the scholarly neglect of the *Consolation's* philosophical poetics. In general, it limits our thinking:

There is, for example, the ubiquitous view that poetry is somehow important to the text's consolatory purpose—indeed, the figure of Philosophy insists that this is so—but this ubiquitous view is typically offered as self-evident. In some oblique manner, it is suggested, the poetry and other literary aspects of the text must surely help the prisoner along, but the real work of consolation is done by 'the argument'. The poetry may anticipate or confirm the argument, or perhaps 'represent' its progress, or sometimes even help to 'advance' the argument, but its role is finally subordinated to whatever 'the argument' might be.⁹

This point about modern assumptions is crucial. Its scope extends well beyond the present study. The assumption that we are ultimately dealing with *nothing beyond* argument pervades mainstream pedagogy. Introductory teaching tends to presuppose a quasi-visual scheme, as though philosophy and its history can be adequately represented in a Linnean manner. In Blackwood's terms, the concomitant rhythm is like a factory's, perhaps as in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). Uniformity is essential;

7. Blackwood, 1.

8. Blackwood, 4-5.

9. Blackwood, 3.

speed is the only variable. Its repetitions form something like a march: "Descartes is a *RATIONALIST!* Hume is an *EMPIRICIST!*"

The "contemporary" rhythm obscures rather than clarifies. "But because we can understand the words—which is what we think reading is, fundamentally—we are unlikely to believe we are missing anything."¹⁰ Blackwood's critique offers important corrections for anybody concerned with the contemporary liberal arts.

STRUCTURE: AN ASCENT WITHIN THE ASCENT

Poetic Liturgy is charitable and teacherly in its structure. Beginning with the aforementioned reading notes, we prepare to stop "reading" the *Consolation*. We begin to prioritize the ear and build our encounter with the *Consolation*. "Simply put," we are told, "the method of this investigation is to listen to these rhythms in the context of their poems and in relation to each other and the narrative as a whole."¹¹

The work consists in "the metric analysis of particular poems (Part I); the exploration of obvious metric repetitions (Part II); the discovery of a rhythmic system that comprehends every poem (Part III); and the placement of this system with the psychological and theological principles that govern the work as a whole (Part IV)."¹²

Note the structure's implicit broadening movement. Part I treats particular metres in particular cases. Part II considers them in combined repetitions. In Part III, a theory of salvific rhythm systematically frames the repetitions. Finally, the perspective of divine vision in Part IV encompasses the rhythmic system and integrates it into a larger whole. Ultimately the human itself is integrated into the whole through mediating prayer; that is, through rhythm, repetition, and recollection.

Part III, "Repetition and Recollection: A System of Rhythmic Sound" is essential to *Poetic Liturgy's* integral synthesis. Blackwood considers ancient and medieval accounts of sense, recollection and intellect: Plato, Aristotle, and other essential figures appear. This sketch further acquaints us with a world for which "the relation of repetition and recollection was a matter of profound and intense

10. Blackwood, 5-6.

11. Blackwood, 23-24.

12. Blackwood, 28.

interest."¹³

Part III also uses life's inherent rhythmicity:

In speech, for example, repetition is the act of saying or hearing again something that has already been said or heard, and this is an essential activity in our acquisition of language. Through heard repetition we slowly learn to distinguish certain sounds from others, and begin to interpret an otherwise indecipherable acoustic stream. These passively heard repetitions are eventually actively repeated, for it is by repeating words that one learns to speak. It is not coincidental that an infant's first words are often comprised of the repetition of a single syllable (*ma-ma, da-da, etc.*) or that they often reduce multisyllable words to the repetition of the first syllable.¹⁴

The phenomenology of life's rhythms assists us in our main task, which is to follow Boethius' contemplative *itinerarium*.

Part III's philosophical-historical and phenomenological perspectives address an "interpretive paradox" arising from Part I and II. "On the one hand, [Joachim Gruber's] visual charts are lifeless and abstract; and on the other, their living reality is too complex to hold together or even to follow in its entirety as it [...] we need is a middle ground between simply reading the text without listening for the patterns, on the one hand, and representing the patterns as wholly abstracted from the text, on the other."¹⁵

Hence the two "approaches" to rhythmic repetition:

The first approach is historical and aims to evoke [...] the ways repetition and memory were entwined with moral, aesthetical, intellectual, spiritual, and literary practices [...] by way of texts with which Boethius was familiar. The second approach is an imaginative and biographical one; that is, to consider the interconnection of repetition and recollection from examples of my experience, examples for which I hope every reader will find parallels in his or her own mind.¹⁶

Part III helps us grasp more than the *Consolation's* rhythmic system, its historical situation and its relation to life's rhythms. Its function is ascetic. It prepares us for the *κόσμος* expressed in "the psychological and theological principles that govern the work as a whole." Part IV finally reveals mediating prayer to be human freedom's finite form, and practical means.

13. Blackwood, 159.

14. Blackwood, 159-160.

15. Blackwood, 159.

16. Blackwood, 159.

To understand *Poetic Liturgy's* grand synthesis, we must metrically examine the prisoner's and Philosophy's dialogue. To conclude this essay, I will look at their initial encounter in *Consolation 1*.

RHYTHMIC SALVATION; OR, HOW TO ESCAPE FROM PRISON

The story is well-known. Condemned, the prisoner laments his abandonment by the Muses to *Fortuna*:

I who was ónce at the héight of my pówers a master of
vérsecraft—

Woé is me!—weéping, coérced, énter the griéf-ridden
móde.

Lo! Their cheeks hárrowed, the Múses come tell me the
words I must take down,

Ánd they now dampen my face with lachrymose élegy's
truth.

Thém, and them ónly, no panic could vánquish or frighten
from coming

Ás my companions alone óver the páth I must tread.

Théy who were ónce the delight of a yóuth that was
prósperous and háppy

In my misfórtunes consóle mé, now a griéving old mán

Whíle faithless Fórtune was pártial to mé with ephéméral
fávors,

A síngle, deplóráble hoúr néarly plunged mé in my gráve.

Nów that she's dárkly transfórméd her appeárances, éver
deceitful

Múst then my únholý lífe drag out this ghástly deláy?

Téll me, my friénd's, why you boásted so óften that Í was so
bléssèd—

Sóldiers who fell never hád stáble ground ón which to
stánd.¹⁷

17. "Carmina qui quondam studio florente peregi./flebilis heu maestos cogor inire modos./Ecce mihi lacerae dictant scribenda Camenae/et veris elegi fletibus ora rigant./Has saltem nullus potuit pervincere terror/ne nostrum comites prosequerentur iter./Gloria felicitis olim viridisque iuventae,/solantur maesti nunc mea fata senis./ [...] Dum levibus male fida

When “youth [...] was prosperous and happy,” the Muses presented the prisoner’s happiness as a cosmic “given”. Now the world appears without order. Once “a master of versecraft,” he can contemplate the world in neither thought nor word. Fortune has “darkly transformed her appearances, ever deceitful.” The base here is Neoplatonic: salvation lies in the relation of *exitus* and *reditus*. The enmattered soul seeks reunion with God. The prisoner has Fallen to the depths. He sees only mutable matter’s treacherous mutability.

On Blackwood’s analysis, 1,I’s interplay between dactylic hexameter and pentameter formally mirrors the lament. Evenness characterizes the dactylic hexameter, like so: *DUM da da | DUM da da | DUM[^] da da | DUM da da | DUM da da | DUM dum*.¹⁸ The uneven Pentameter contrasts with the hexameter in elegiac couplets: *DUM da da | DUM da da | DUM | DUM | da da DUM | da da DUM*.

Thus the first poem’s first couplet captures the situation in form and content: “I who was once at the height of my powers a master of versecraft—/Woe is me!—weeping, coerced, enter the grief ridden mode.” The first line, recalling former happiness, is in hexameter; the second, showing us present misery, is in pentameter. The second line seems to continue apace, thanks to misleading similarities:

Because this second line has so far maintained the rhythm of hexameter from the first line (i.e. the *DUM da da DUM da da DUM*) through two-and-a-half feet, the listener expects the pause of the caesura, and the second half of the second line to begin with the upbeat of the third foot of a line of hexameter—i.e., *da da DUM da da DUM da da DUM dum*. Instead, the rhythm is interrupted with another downbeat ... shattering the hope of a softening tone.¹⁹

Here, form and content appear in clear unity. The prisoner’s happy metres express rational order; the “time” of his suffering is “out

bonis fortuna faveret/panae caput tristis merserat hora meum:/nunc quia fallacem impia vita moras./Quid me felicem totiens iactastis, amici?/Qui cecidit, stabili non erat ille gradu.” (Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Joel Relihan [Indianapolis : Hackett Publishing Company], 2001. Reproduced in Blackwood [2015], pp. 244-45. The acute accents indicate metric emphasis, as per Blackwood’s English-language notation.)

18. Here I follow the author’s wonderfully homey way of getting us to clap our hands and tap our feet to philosophize, as I mentioned in the introduction. The “^” represents “a caesura, which is a slight pause at a word-break that occurs not between [metric] feet ... but inside a foot” (Blackwood, xx).

19. Blackwood, 37-38.

of joint". His misery's weight resides in the couplet's ungainly conclusion, most clearly with "*cogor inire modos*" (I am forced into grief-ridden modes). The author continues:

The interruptive quality of the second half of the line, the moment the metre is established as elegy, is matched with a syntactic intention: the three words [*cogor inire modos*] occur in the order of the action, cinematically, as it were: *cogor inire modos* (I am forced to enter into [sad] metres). The poet has introduced the metric form with maximum effect: this line of pentameter is rhythmically, thematically, and compositionally disjunctive, even radically so, with the line of hexameter it pairs.²⁰

Philosophy's task is to rhythmically reintegrate the prisoner. If the latter now sees—or rather, hears—only what elegiac couplets suggest, the former must reacquaint him with providential rhythms. In her raucous stage entrance, our lady dispels the degenerate "Music" rhythms that have falsified the *κόσμος*. "Woe is him!" she exclaims; "Plunged to the depths, sunk to the bottom, / Mind loses all of its edge, casts off its own light."²¹

Her initial poetry, bearing its own unevenness, carries healing power:

The extent of the prisoner's muse-induced illness provokes a poetic lament from Philosophy. Her lament, however, is not in elegiac couplets, or even in couplet form: her lament, by contrast, has the same metre in every line [...] nonetheless, there are similarities: first, this metre also begins with what initially sounds like dactylic hexameter; in fact, every line of both this and the prisoner's poem begins with the same metric division: *dum da da dum da da dum*. Second, in this poem too this hexametric beat is interrupted (as in the pentameter of the prisoner's poem) in the middle of the third foot with an unexpected downbeat, here with an invariable adonic ... or *dum da da dum dum*. Here, though, the effect is less disturbing than in the prisoner's poem—and is so more easily anticipated by the listener's ear.²²

Philosophy heals the prisoner through rhythmic integration. She intertwines her modes with his and, in doing so, heals him. She helps him lift his eyes from the ground and look up so that he can once again see the providential order working in the world of accident. Through this process, he is called to his freedom in God.

20. Blackwood, 38.

21. "*Heu, quam praecipiti mersa profundo/mens hebet et propria luce relicta*". (Boethius, trans. Relihan, in Blackwood [2015], 244).

22. Blackwood, 44.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Poetic Liturgy is a needful work as the modern university—its paradigm, techniques, and goals—come to a close. Dr Blackwood earnestly wishes to retrieve liberal arts education from the fate that George Grant foresaw in works like *Technology and Empire* (1969) and *Technology and Justice* (1986). I think that his contribution is highly successful in this regard. As a philosopher, teacher, scholar, and student, I am certain that it will become a go-to text for me. I thank him for that. The more inventive, rigorous essays in philosophical pedagogy we have, the better.

As to the apparent divergence between Blackwood's trajectory and Boethius': I see it as the opportunity for more thinking. Blackwood is sensitive to whether liturgical practices are "enough" in themselves. Following Robert Crouse's treatment of the Semi-Pelagian problem,²³ he notes that Lady Philosophy establishes providence's simple governance of the multiple at *Consolation 4, VI*.²⁴

Yet, again, *Poetic Liturgy* concludes not with rest in simple unity, but with what is salvific in the moving multiple. Does it then philosophically differ from the *Consolation*? Or is this a mere matter of emphasis? Perhaps *Poetic Liturgy* intends to rectify pedagogical-liturgical matters and leave Boethius' Christian Neoplatonic ascent to each itinerant as it calls to her or him. The author explicitly wishes *Poetic Liturgy* to help us with that ascent, although, without saying that Boethius' end should be ours. For, now, it will have to remain an open question that, I hope, will spur future contributions from the author.

23. See Robert Crouse, "St. Augustine, Semi-Pelagianism and the *Consolation of Boethius*," *Dionysius* 22 (2004), 95-109.

24. *Poetic Liturgy*, 228.