

Transcendent Truths:
The Literary Classics of Boethius and Goethe

Kyle Hemes

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Dennis McEnnerney
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Philosophies and religions of the world are creations of the civilized man, the man who needs something more, some purpose beyond the dreary existence that consumes him. The world is not an idealistic, orderly haven for humans, but rather characterized by a painful, messy, immoral existence. To cope, man has resorted to transcendence of this mortal world to reach a place more idealistic and true. Generally, this transcendence is of a malleable quality, shaped primarily by the social context of the time. By analyzing two literary classics, Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* and Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, we can distinguish and interpret the two major transcendental ways of searching for truth, and understand the social context that causes each.

Throughout intellectual history, there has been no lack of philosophers willing to articulate the dreary state of the world. In general, they tell the readers about the tragedies of existence, only to follow by their all-encompassing philosophy, which will of course solve everything. As Jean-Paul Sartre famously put it, "man is condemned to be free." This French existentialist argued that in the absence of God, man is free to do anything, for there is no right or wrong.¹ Even Schumpeter agrees, arguing that, "There is... no such thing as a uniquely determined common good..." His reasoning is that ultimate values are beyond "the range of mere logic."² Or as Rousseau explained, man is naturally "savage", with "self preservation... his sole concern."³ Possibly one of the harshest critics of man is Machiavelli, who condones immoral and false leadership due to the fact that "men are wicked and will not keep faith with you".⁴ The consensus of these thinkers shows us that life is harsh and imperfect, and any educated person who reflects beyond his present survival instincts will realize this. So what serves as the vehicle to

carry us through this sorrowful existence, for as we are told by some rather optimistic sources, such as the front of popular earth toned caricatured t-shirts, “life is good”.

Boethius’s middle age philosophical text, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, serves to exemplify one of the two main transcendental ideals for understanding the world we live in. Boethius, one of the last members of the Roman Empire, wrote this text from his jail cell, awaiting execution after being caught in a (probably fabricated) plot to overthrow the ruling Germanics. The prisoner in the novel, who is actually representative of Boethius, has been condemned to death by his fellow senators (and former friends) for unjust reasons. This bleak context is essential in understanding Boethius’s philosophy.

The Consolation of Philosophy is a dialogue between the prisoner (Boethius) and the personification of philosophy. Philosophy, the character, is a woman, “sometimes... of average size, while at other times she seemed to touch the sky with the top of her head, and when she lifted herself even higher, she pierced it and was lost to human sight.”⁵ This is obviously an underlying message on the nature of philosophical thought, that at times it may seem very human but it can also be so distant as to be “lost to human sight.”⁶ Boethius is wallowing in self-pity after losing his fame and glory and now facing execution. He complains, “In all adversity of fortune, the most wretched kind is once to have been happy.”⁷ Philosophy’s message to this is rather clear, she consoles the prisoner, “not by offering sympathy, but by showing that Boethius has no good reason to complain: true happiness, she wished to argue, is not damaged even by the sort of disaster he has experienced.”⁸

This is our first glimpse of Boethius's intended transcendental truth, the truth that nothing in the material world is of any significance, that all material goods, whether they be things, pleasures, even one's body, degenerate with time into nothingness. John Marenbon, in his Stanford Encyclopedia entry, labels this a "complex view of the highest god." He argues that true goods to Philosophy include "virtues... sufficiency... friends and family." Boethius's materialistic loss should in no way "cut him off from true happiness."⁹ For these reasons, Philosophy attempts to lead Boethius down a path of enlightenment, towards truth. She is trying to show him that there is no truth in the material world, only degenerating chaos. To find truth, he must look up into the heavens instead of down into his own self-pity and feelings. The physical world is a trap; one needs a sense of self that transcends the material, mortal world. This is the basis of Boethius's transcendental view; the question is now what to see in the heavens when looking towards this higher truth.

The second part of Boethius's transcendental view is a little more complicated, and is disagreed upon by opposing scholars. Marenbon discusses the divine prescience that Philosophy talks about. "Philosophy's solution is to argue (V.2) that rational acts of volition, unlike external events, do not themselves belong to the causal chain of fate." Philosophy is trying to say that men who are bound to God have the freedom of rational will, while those stuck in their materialistic, impassioned existence are at the fate of the world, with no true free will.¹⁰ Through language and thought, rational God loving individuals should be provoking others to contemplate their higher eternal God. If you are not resisting the material world to be one with God, you are just a product of fate in the greater world, unaware of the truth.

Both Marenbon and another prominent Boethius scholar, Joel Relihan, believe that in some ways, Boethius didn't totally "buy" Philosophy's whole argument. Marenbon gives the more logical view, arguing that the prisoner and Philosophy misunderstood each other on one major point. Marenbon explains that Philosophy claimed that God "knows them [events] because they happen, rather than their happening because he foreknows them."¹¹ Boethius, thinking the latter of the statements, that God would take care of things for him, did not take an active role through language and thought to connect with God's eternal oneness. This ambiguity in reaching God after abandoning all worldly, material possessions is one place where this transcendental process is fuzzy. For this reason, Marenbon concludes that Boethius was suggesting, "Philosophy... falls short of providing a coherent and comprehensive understanding of God and his relation to creatures" and that "Boethius the character should be satisfied, but not completely satisfied, by Philosophy's argument."¹²

Relihan, on the other hand, takes a more radical view of the *Consolation*, reading it ironically. He argues that the *Consolation* was an attempt to show the "insufficiency of Philosophy (and philosophy) to provide consolation, by contrast with Christian faith."¹³ Relihan believes that the prisoner could never overcome the material world, the tragedy of his injustice and bad fortune. The prisoner's frequent return to this concern causes Relihan to conclude that the prisoner "accepts physical reality as divine reality" and ends up praying in his cell instead of transcending it to reach a higher truth.¹⁴

So where does this analysis leave us? Possibly the most helpful aspect of Relihan's analysis is simply the title of his book, *The Prisoner's Philosophy*, for that is exactly what Boethius was writing. Boethius's transcendent ideal is very appealing to

prisoners, both literally and figuratively. It is appealing to believe that material possessions are meaningless when you are a poor peasant, slave, or inmate who has none. There is hope in this transcendent philosophy for the oppressed, poor people of the Middle Ages, for it instills in them the sense that this world is meaningless and that truth can be found by anyone through the realization of a higher eternal being and a disconnect from the material world. After denouncing all material possessions, the ambiguity comes when you ask “what now?” Boethius may have been suggesting that this is the shortcoming of philosophy, but maybe an alternative answer is to enlighten others, to logically think and speak about the concept, provoking others to unify their beliefs into the transcendental feeling of a common eternal God.

The other major, more modern way of looking at essential transcendental truth is best exemplified through Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. In this tragic epistolary novel of the 18th century, like Boethius, Goethe portrays a version of himself and his experiences. Young Werther moves to a small traditional German village, falls deeply in love with Lotte, who is already engaged to Albert, and eventually kills himself after realizing he can’t be with his true love. A very parallel situation occurred in Goethe’s life. He moved to the German village of Wetzlar and fell in love with Lotte Buff who he didn’t know was engaged to a “serious minded and intelligent man”¹⁵ named Kestner. Goethe seriously considered suicide but instead overcame his sorrow by writing a novel, a process strangely similar to that of Boethius.

As in the *Consolation*, it is important to discuss Werther’s (and in parallel Goethe’s) context for his philosophy. Werther lived a cushy existence in the upper middle class. He was brought to Walheim to finish up a remaining business issue of his

mother's. Werther doesn't immediately need to be working; he obviously has enough assets to be blowing all his time prancing through gorgeous meadows with Lotte. He lives in a very materialistic world, not unlike the 21st century, with very strict class structures that define worth by the amount of possessions one has. It is this world his philosophy is based on, a world where his fate was to one day get a job and fit into the defined social constructs. Werther, however, was not like everyone else. Goethe presents a story of a man who doesn't fit in with his society or its morality, a society that doesn't make room for uniqueness or difference.

The simplest interpretation of this novel is through the eyes of an unsympathetic traditionalist like Hans Reiss. Reiss claims, "*Werther* is a story of a young man who, through emotional imbalance, accentuated by an unhappy love-affair, finally commits suicide... the most extreme action open to anyone in relation to himself."¹⁶ This is a simple interpretation, but there is much more hidden meaning and truth under Werther's apparent "egocentric self."¹⁷ Reiss's biggest criticisms are of what he sees as Werther's skewed views of nature and religion. Reiss tells us that "God is, for him [Werther]... the spirit visible in nature, and nature inspires him to think of God and to participate in His activity. His [Werther's] language indicates that he does not clearly distinguish between God and His creation. God, in a sense, appears to him as the creative spirit of the world." Reiss goes on to mention that, "Intensity of feeling also leads him astray in his religious judgments" and concludes, "Werther is removed from the Christian tradition. Isolated by his feelings, he is incapable of distinguishing between superstition and ecclesiastic tradition, between feeling and custom."¹⁸

Reiss is stuck in his traditional views, unable to see the splendor in Werther's slightly whimsical and unique but very legitimate truth. Werther is actually a very spiritual character, though not in a traditional religious sense. He is unhappy with the traditional morals of the material world he lives in, and therefore searches for an outlet in which to transcend the mortal world. His disdain for the society he lives in can be seen in his letter on May 17th in which he writes, "The human race is a monotonous affair. Most people spend the greatest part of their time working in order to live, and what little freedom remains so fills them with fear that they seek out any and every means to be rid of it."¹⁹ Werther is critical of the unemotional conformity he sees in Walheim, a conformity that doesn't in any way fit in with his values. Werther finds his truth in nature, art, and beauty, using feeling and emotions as a way to interpret and immerse himself in them. Describing his feelings on "sweet spring mornings", lying "in the tall grass by the tumbling brook", Werther wishes that one could "breathe onto the paper in all its fullness and warmth what is so alive in you, so that it would mirror your soul as your soul is the mirror of God in His infinity!"²⁰ Clearly Werther has a deep spiritual connection to beauty and nature, so his mentions of this holy God may appear slightly contradictory. They seem more like they are denoting a spiritual importance than any true Christian belief, emphasizing the transcendent quality of the nature and beauty he is so consumed with rather than traditional religious values.

Werther is not "isolated from his feelings" as Reiss claims, but is rather legitimized by his feelings. He is so passionate in his feelings that he is able to find his own truth through them. His feelings are the only way for him to transcend the world through art, beauty, and nature. Unlike many people, he takes his feelings as truth

instead of doubting them and pushing them aside. It is true that Werther “does not clearly distinguish between God and His creation” because for Werther, truth is the “creation”; truth is nature in all its beauty. Although this may be untraditional and uncivilized to Reiss, Werther’s transcendent truth is valid in its own ways, for it provided him happiness and a way to escape the sorrows of existence.

James D. Wilson, in his article, “Goethe’s Werther: A Keatsian Quest for Self-Annihilation”, gives a refreshingly clear argument of Werther’s true views. Wilson views Werther through the lens of the English Romantic poets Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats. Thoroughly inspired by Keats’ poetry, Wilson tells us, “The imagination through art provides mortal man with his only experience of the conditions of heavenly bliss; such occurs only when the artist is able to surrender self-consciousness to his vision and be momentarily transformed.”²¹ In parallel, Werther sees art and beauty as his way to transcend the mortal, material world to a higher, more profound truth. Wilson provides a much more accurate view of Werther’s relationship, proclaiming, “Werther – like Keats’ characters – makes his ascent to union with Lotte only through the medium of art. In the world of dance, music or literature, Werther and Lotte become one; they seem momentarily to lose individual identity and merge into something larger than themselves.”²² Werther’s and Lotte’s relationship is not one of traditional love, but rather they are to each other portals into a higher truth. Together, through their mutual appreciation of art and beauty, they are able to transcend the material world to find true happiness.

Werther’s suicide comes about as a result of his inability to have Lotte for himself, symbolizing his inability to perpetually transcend the mortal world through art

and beauty, in part due to “Albert-the reminder of Werther’s immortality, the ephemeral nature of his transcendence”.²³ It was not caused, as Reiss claims, by “an unhappy love-affair”²⁴ or because Werther’s love “becomes barren”.²⁵ The realization that Werther can’t achieve his truth, the transcendence of the material world through art and beauty, attained through his relationship with Lotte, is seen when Werther tragically admits, “My heart’s immense and ardent feeling for living Nature, which overwhelmed me with so great a joy and made the world about me a very paradise, has now become an unbearable torment...”²⁶

This version of a transcendent truth is born from much different circumstances than Boethius’s truth. Werther, similar to the people of the twenty-first century, lives in a relatively luxurious and materialistic world, not constantly worried about mere survival. Existence alone in this lifestyle is greatly characterized by conforming consumer monotony. Out of this world comes not a disregard for material and human things, but transcendence through a higher appreciation of these things; through material beauty found in nature and art, giving in to purely human emotions and feelings. David Brooks realizes this trend, describing the “bourgeois bohemians”²⁷ as a class of modern Americans who “are living in a world that values the worldly more than the divine.”²⁸ Spiritually, he accurately characterizes his “Bobo” modern Americans as “a group who seem to get our spiritual charges from tangible things...experience[ing] our spiritual epiphanies while communing with the physical environment...”²⁹

But in all parts of America, especially below this middle-upper class of “Bobos” that Brooks fails to consider, there are still religiously transcendent people, those who would relate to Boethius’s truth much more passionately than young Werther’s.

Especially those people who are similar to the bleak peasants of Boethius's time, trapped in their social class by wealth, birth, race, or other circumstances, are more interested in denouncing their material possessions (which they may lack) to believe in a higher, transcendental truth of eternal good. The lofty "Bobos" with their "aircraft hanger"³⁰ sized kitchen and "oversized slate shower stall"³¹ are less inclined to gravitate towards a truth that denounces material possessions. They seem to follow Werther, more interested in a transcendental truth through nature and art, through REI and the Guggenheim. This isn't exactly what Werther had in mind, for I don't claim that many spiritual aspiring upper class Americans feel in any way the same depth that Werther did, but the concept of their truth is essentially similar, and it is designed to fit their social context.

Life standing alone is brutal; it is too shallow, too hard, too fake, and too messy. There is no morality, no true good or bad, and nothing to give true meaning. Humans have been forced to come up with ways to transcend our mortal world to find truth, meaning, and happiness. That earth toned "life is good" t-shirt is not an inborn truth; we make life good through our belief in transcendence of one sort or another. Both Boethius and Goethe are essentially writing about themselves, writing their books to validate their truths by fitting transcendence to their situation. Maybe Boethius was executed feeling that his happiness was in no way diminished and the material world was of no significance anyway, and Werther felt better about killing himself for he knew that it was his only chance to permanently transcend the mortal world through art and beauty. Both of these authors took the horrors of existence and masked them in transcendent truths that somehow rise above this world, but by opposite means. While Boethius essentially found his truth floating in the heavens, Werther found truth with his face in the grass on a crisp

spring morning. Humans need transcendent truths to oppose reality, and the nature of these truths are directly affected by their situations in life, so as to turn their dismal existence into one of truth and happiness.

Notes

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," in *The Fabric of Existentialism*, ed. Richard Gill and Ernest Sherman (Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973), 524.

² Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1942), 251.

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 44.

⁴ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. David Wootton (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 54.

⁵ Anicius Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Victor Watts (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸ John Marenbon, "Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2005 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2005/entries/boethius/>, 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴ Joel C. Relihan, *The Prisoner's Philosophy: Life and Death in Boethius's Consolation* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 32.

¹⁵ Hans Reiss, *Goethe's Novels* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1969), 12.

¹⁶ Ibid., 17.

¹⁷ Ibid., 26.

¹⁸ Ibid., 39.

¹⁹ Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 29.

²⁰ Ibid., 26-27.

²¹ James D. Wilson, "Goethe's *Werther*: A Keatsian Quest for Self-Annihilation," *Mosaic*, 9:1 (1975:Fall): 99.

²² Ibid., 100.

²³ Ibid., 103.

²⁴ Reiss, *Goethe's Novels*, 17.

²⁵ Reiss, *Goethe's Novels*, 41.

²⁶ Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 65.

²⁷ David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 11.

²⁸ Ibid., 217.

²⁹ Ibid., 251.

³⁰ Ibid., 87.

³¹ Ibid., 85.

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