CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

GOD IS LOVE*

DANTE AND BOETHIUS

Dante ends his *Divina Commedia* with the following words:

All’ alta fantasia qui mancò possa;
ma già volgeva il mio disio e ’l velle,
si come rota ch’igualmente è mossa,
l’amor che move il sole e l’alte stelle.

Here power failed the lofty phantasy;
but already my desire and my will were revolved,
like a wheel that is evenly moved,
by the Love which moves the sun and the other stars.
(Translation Charles S. Singleton)

Although the commentaries which I consulted do not mention it, certainly someone will have observed already that the last line is a meaningful quotation from Boethius:

That this fair world in settled course
her several forms should vary,
That a perpetual law should tame
the fighting seeds of things,
That Phoebus should the rosy day
in his bright chariot carry,
That Phoebe should govern the nights
which Hesperus forth brings,
That to the floods of greedy seas
are certain bounds assigned,
Which them, lest they usurp too much
upon the earth, debar,
*Love ruling heaven, and earth, and seas,*
them in this course doth bind.

And if it once let loose their reins,
their friendship turns to war,
Tearing the world whose ordered form
their quiet motions bear.
By it all holy laws are made
and marriage rites are tied,
by it is faithful friendship joined.
How happy ye mortals are,
if the Eros which governs the heaven
does also reign in your heart.
O felix hominum genus,
si vestros animos amor
quo caelum regitur regat.
Consolatio Philosophiae, II, metrum 8
(Translation after H.F. Stewart)

This love, according to Boethius, is a cosmogonic Eros, not only ruling
heaven and earth and seas, but also working in man as social sense
and public spirit (“by it all holy laws are made”) and, moreover, as the
instinct of procreation by which “marriage rites are tied” and friend-
ship is instigated among males.¹

**EROS IN DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITA**

Very much the same concept is to be found in the contemporary of
Boethius, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names*, IV,
11–18. And it is plausible that both are using a common source.

The passage in Dionysius is one of the most daring and delightful
of Greek literature.² No wonder that translators did all they could to
make it incomprehensible, translating Eros by “Yearning” and glossing
over the erotic relation between David and Jonathan!

Eros has several aspects according to Dionysius:

Inferior things yearn for the superior by being attracted (*epistriptikôs*). And
those of the same rank love their equals in communion (*koinônikôs*). And the
superior love their inferiors by taking care of them (*pronoëtikôs*). And every
thing loves itself through the instinct of self preservation, self love
(*synektikôs*).

¹ The technical term “cosmogonic Eros” has been coined by the German philosopher
² Dionysius is leaning heavily here on Origen; cf. John. M. Rist, *Eros and Psyche*,
Toronto 1964, 204.