

The “Cold Sophie” of *Gravity’s Rainbow*

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Part 3 of *Gravity’s Rainbow* begins with a set of references to the *Eis-Heiligen*, or “ice-saints,” so called ironically because their feast days often coincide with the last frost days in a late spring. Unlike standard saints, their interventions for good cannot be relied upon:

We are safely past the days of the Eis-Heiligen—St. Pancratius, St. Servatius, St. Bonifacius, die kalte Sophie . . . they hover in clouds above the vineyards, holy beings of ice, ready with a breath, an intention, to ruin the year with frost and cold. (281)

The last of the four, *die kalte Sophie*, is singled out by the adjectives’ not being translated, thus drawing special attention to her. Although Steven Weisenburger identified the first three saints and the dates of their respective feast days, May 12, 13 and 14, he was baffled by *die kalte Sophie*:

Christian hagiographies speak of just one Sophie or Sophia: the second-century martyr of Rome whose three children (Faith, Hope, and Charity) all suffered martyrdom under Hadrian. But her feast day is September 30. Sources on Germanic folk tradition and legend are equally mum about “die kalte Sophie.” (150)

The allusion turns out to be both simple and complex.

Decoding the immediate reference is relatively straightforward. The solution may be found in a standard dictionary of colloquial German, Küpper’s *Wörterbuch der deutschen Umgangssprache*. Under Sophie, who also goes by the dialect name “Sophierl,” she is identified as another of the ice-saints, whose name day is May 15. Because she is the last in the series of rather unpredictable saints, she has also garnered the unflattering epithet “Sophie with the cold ass” (“*Sophie mit dem kalten Arsch*”), much as in English one might refer to a concluding point as the ass end of something. Or, as Pynchon has it, she is the last in the “rear-guard who preserve winter against the revolutionaries of May” (281).

There is also a hint that this female saint may resemble an unfeeling woman touched by frigidity. American slang refers to such a woman as

a "cold-hearted bitch." The phrase seems to have been current (although the fact may be merely coincidental) during the 1940s, for the *Dictionary of American Slang* cites "cold-hearted bitch" from Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?*, which first appeared in 1941. The *Dictionary* goes on to describe "bitch" as "A woman, usu[ually], but not necessarily, a mean, selfish, malicious, deceiving, cruel, or promiscuous woman." A female saint who is fickle, either bringing frost or not, according to the vagaries of the season, would indeed conform to such a description.

On a more rarefied yet very relevant plane, Sophie is also the figure of wisdom, still apparent in the word philo-sophy. The personification of wisdom as a female figure has a long history.¹ But why should she be cold? Relevant here is Boethius's use of the personified figure of Philosophy as a woman in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. *The Consolation* is a founding text for the tradition of Menippean satire, which *Gravity's Rainbow* continues into the present, so it is hardly surprising to see the figure make an appearance (see Payne 55-85, and Kirk). Despite Boethius's title, Lady Philosophy's consolation turns out to be rather forbidding and not all that gentle with the prisoner. As Henry Chadwick observes, she "has stern rebuke to offer him" (227). Not only the lamenting prisoner feels her sharp tongue; the Muses are also chastised: "'Who . . . has allowed these hysterical sluts to approach this sick man's bedside? They have no medicine to ease his pains, only sweetened poisons to make them worse'" (Boethius 36). In her swings of mood from harsh criticism to gentle persuasion, Philosophy resembles, at least on the surface, the fickle and unpredictable cold Sophie.

The likelihood that the reference to cold Sophie is meant to allude to Lady Philosophy is reinforced by the immediate context of Pynchon's text. The topic, how difficult it is to know how the weather will turn out, is couched in language very close to the allegories of *The Consolation of Philosophy*:

In certain years, especially War years, [the Eis-Heiligen] are short on charity, peevish, smug in their power: not quite saintly or even Christian. The prayers of growers, pickers and wine enthusiasts must reach them, but there's no telling how the ice-saints feel—coarse laughter, pagan annoyance, who understands this rear-guard who preserve winter against the revolutionaries of May? (281)

That is precisely the question Boethius's prisoner puts to Lady Philosophy: How can anyone make sense of a universe where events seem to be random, bad things happen to good people, and the wicked

prosper? "It may be part of human weakness to have evil wishes, but it is nothing short of monstrous that God should look on while every criminal is allowed to achieve his purpose against the innocent" (Boethius 44). Events seem to happen randomly, without purpose; the order of things is hidden to humans as they go about their business. *The Consolation of Philosophy* argues that this sense of chaos is an illusion created by the limited human perspective (see Gegenschatz and Baltes). Readers of *Gravity's Rainbow* are to learn the same lesson. But in both cases there is something disturbing in the counsel that the ultimate causes and final answers are not known to us. Neither Lady Philosophy nor cold Sophie can bring more than a chilling comfort to mere mortals.

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Note

¹For overviews, see "Wisdom" in Jeffrey (831–36), Quitslund, Benz and Ammann. Ammann also reminds us that Sophia outranked Mary in Eastern Orthodox traditions, from which fact we might infer that the invocation of Sophie at this juncture in the novel coincides with the Russian triumph over Germany in the spring of 1945.

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