

Boltzmann at Duino – For Michael

By Sean de Podesta

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You hope for something non-theoretical,
Your daughter's smile,
The sound of your wife's voice,
Or how she would touch you affectionately
When you were younger;
But now no-one is with you.

On the parapet of a castle,
Atop a high cliff,
One can feel defended and secure –Secure enough to look out over the sea
And contemplate its near-infinity,
To celebrate the life-giving essence of the air
To speculate what forces move the wind;
You have done all these things.
You have contrived poetic expressions
Of your fine elevated feelings;
You have calculated experimentally verified equations

Or one can feel the vertiginous exhilaration
Of contemplating release.
You are an old man, but you could be leaping
Out, out there for a few seconds
(You can make the calculation in your head),
Experiencing the thrill of weightless flight,
Plummeting, Boltzmann, into the depths.
This is just one of many tantalizing
Reflections and temptations.

Like a harp tuned to the wind
Your intellect responds to every disturbance of the ether,
Alert to invisible undulations; you infer
The collisions of atoms and calculate
The long decay of the universe.
It is as if by discovering the laws
You are their creator
And the world is somehow yours.
A humorous conceit: If you were God, The Designer,
You would certainly have used these equations.

But, Boltzmann, this is too proud;
You value humility above pride.
You tune to the field, feel the interactions of atoms
Not out there but inside.
The tuning fork, the aerial, the physicists brain,
Are part of nature, points of awareness
In the universe of itself, and dispersing
(as the equations predict),
To some point of disappearance
With loss of awareness
That you are gone, in the act of thinking,
Till random processes lead to your re-emergence
At some point in eternity's slow course.
Nature is true, but daunting.
You have studied philosophy
And have become stoic
Up to the limit of pain
And non-endurance

As a man, well-situated but
Suffering the pains of any sixty-year old,
You know that September is the sweetest month
To be on the coast.

Your hotel is comfortable.

You feel not an intellectual but an animal
And when you look over the glittering Adriatic
Under the pale azure sky,
The landscape, seascape, skyscape,
Are like a proxy for infinity
And you feel not just animal, but an animal with a soul.
And you want out of the numinous atmosphere
Something divine to coalesce –
Or semi-divine would suffice:
A beautiful youth who would steal the attention,
Not of your intellect but your heart.
Or better – an angel would emerge
From all the immanent potential in the air,
A guardian angel, who would touch your skin like the sun
Or the warm breeze in the evening, so tender
That you knew you were cherished
And that they were really there.

With an absolute certainty (though you had no equations to prove it).
You would know the universe was benign,
Like God, only requiring no worship,

Simply eliciting gratitude and appreciation.

But your body's overshadowed as the sun goes down
And for all the opening of your heart
No angel comes.
You know so much, but know nothing.
You intuit the whole arc of the universe
But feel just unworthiness and pain
(Why are you unworthy? You cannot explain.)
And there is this fathomless emptiness within.
You cannot hear your wife's voice.
When you go to your room without a guardian angel or hope
You are the finite atoms in the infinite vacuum
Looking for something to serve as a rope.

We ask now, too late, what might have brought you comfort?
Did you even want comfort?
Was comfort even possible for you?
Maybe something in you weighed it all
And balanced Boltzmann the man
And what was still possible for him
Against Boltzmann the sum of his particles
And chose to let yourself flow with the entropic stream?

You intuit something
And you want what you intuit –
That's part of the intuition –
But you don't know what it is,
And in any case feel unworthy of it.
How is this possible?
It is the x in the equation,
The unknown, generalized,
So that the solution confirms
You are unworthy of everything,
Of anything.
 You can claim nothing
In the domain of hope.

This is so unfair, Boltzmann.
Intuitions are true, or *feel* true
But we cannot quantify or predict them:
And when the reality is statistical,
What we expect may never happen
And seeming miracles can occur
Or, more likely, not occur.

And any particular thing does not matter.
So you feel the angel,
But the angel does not come.
That is what you deserve
Or what you don't deserve.
In either case, it is certain
Desolation, and it hurts.

If only, Boltzmann, there were
Where things are so beautiful
A proper theory of hope against despair.