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CONTEMPLATION OF THE DIVINE: CONTEXTS AND IMAGERY IN OLD ENGLISH BOETHIUS¹

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*The Fatherland is there whence we have come
and there is the Father.*

*What then is our course, what the manner of
our flight? This is not a journey for feet...
you must close the eyes and call instead upon
another vision which is to be awakened within you.*
Plotinus, *Ennead* I.6.8.

There are different varieties of mystical experience and of contemplation of the divine; therefore, it is important to know what precisely is taken as the object of research in this paper. Theologians often describe mysticism in the medieval West in terms of religious experience that manifests itself through a passive reception of the overwhelming flow of divine grace. *Le Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* defines mysticism as consisting of two inseparable elements, the penetrating knowledge, or vision, of God and the passionate love of Him, both shed by the Divinity onto the human soul (“... tout état mystique est constitué par ces deux

elements qui ne sont pas séparés: connaissance de Dieu supérieure, mais générale et confuse, et amour très précieux, mais irraisonné, l’un et l’autre directement versés par Dieu dans l’âme.”²) On the other hand, the earlier tradition of Christian thinking that I am investigating here contains much less of the passionate religious experience and more of the conscious intellectual cognition of the divine, which very often finds its expression in rather cold intellectual and philosophical terms, so much so that, as in the case of Augustine, Dom Cuthbert Butler finds it valid to ask, whether it is not the “language of an exalted Platonism describing only the higher operations of the intellect? In other words, the question has to be faced: is it Mysticism, or is it Platonism?”³ Indeed, the Christianity of Late Antiquity and subsequently that of the early Middle Ages (both in the East and in the West) inherited

² Marcel Viller (ed.), *Dictionnaire de spiritualité: ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire II*, Paris: Beauchesne, 1937–1995, col. 2175.

³ Dom Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism: The Teaching of Augustine, Gregory and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life*, London: Constable, 1967, 41–42.

¹ Paper presented at the seminar “Contexts of Medieval Mystical Writing in England,” convened at the Seventh International Conference of The European Society for the Study of English (ESSE-7), Zaragoza (Spain), September 8–12, 2004.

much from the prolonged interaction with Platonist thought, the inquiries of which into the nature of intelligibility were especially important for the development of Christian understanding of human relation with the divine.

In Plotinus, contemplation (*theoria*) is firstly a vision of the things that are; on the part of any existent individual, it is the knowledge of the self, of the subordinate, and of the prior. The soul, being the middle member between the Intelligible realm and the sensible cosmos, can gaze upwards and receive empowerment from the Intellect (*nous*) or, conversely, contemplate things below and in this way arrive at evil (*Enn.* VI.9.11). Philosopher's ascent is an essentially solitary ascent; through its inner identity with the whole Intelligible world, the human soul in contemplation returns to and is assimilated to the One, which is the cause, the beginning, and the end of all things:

If then one sees that oneself has become this, one has oneself as a likeness of that, and if one goes on from oneself, as image to original, one has reached "the end of the journey." And when one falls from the vision, he wakes again the virtue in himself, and considering himself set in order and beautiful by these virtues he will again be lightened and come through virtue to Intellect and wisdom and through wisdom to that Good. This is the life of gods and of godlike and blessed men, deliverance from the things of this world, a life which takes no delight in the things of this world, escape in solitude to the solitary. (*Enn.* VI.9.11.43–51)⁴

Augustine, similarly, describes contemplation as the striving to understand those things that really and supremely are (*appetitio intelligendi ea quae vere summeque sunt*), the de-

⁴ All quotations of Plotinus come from A. H[ilary]. Armstrong (transl.), *Plotinus, Enneads, 7 vols.*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988.

light or full enjoyment of the highest and truest Good (*perfructio summi et veri boni*), the means to reach that highest Cause, or highest Author, or highest Principle of all things (*perventuros per Virtutem Dei atque Sapientiam ad summam illam causam, vel summum auctorem, vel summum principium rerum omnium*)⁵.

The present study explores the recurrent imagery of this particular kind of philosophical or intellectual contemplation in the Old English translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. Three aspects of the intellectual quest for the divine are considered in the paper: first, the doctrine of the **inward turning** to oneself in order to reach the divine; second, the idea of inwardness, or the **inner space** which determines the scope of the cognitive activity of the soul; third, the notion of the **human mind** as the primary tool for the philosophical contemplation of the divine. The investigation of the backgrounds and contexts of the relevant passages of King Alfred's *Boethius* will help us to situate the ninth-century translation within a wider framework of early medieval Christian Neoplatonism, and to see the continuity in thought from the Enneadic scale of cognition to the imagery of spiritual flight in the Anglo-Saxon rendering of the Latin book.

Previous scholarship. As a specimen of early Anglo-Saxon prose, the Old English *Boethius* has long been a subject of medieval literature and translation studies⁶. However, it

⁵ *De Quantitate Animae*, Jacques-Paul Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series latina* 32, Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1992–1994, col. 1076.

⁶ See, for example, F. A. Payne, *King Alfred and Boethius: An Analysis of the Old English Version of the Consolation of Philosophy*, Madison, WI, 1968; Janet Bately, "The Literary Prose of King Alfred's Reign: Translation or Transformation?" (Inaugural Lecture in the Chair of

was only during recent years that the focus of scholarly attention has shifted to the investigation of its doctrinal and speculative backgrounds, allowing new perspectives to the contemplative writings in Old English.

Kurt Otten's book *König Alfred's Boethius* treated at length the subject of human cognition and contemplation, yet concluded that Alfred "evaded all neo-Platonic speculation"⁷ that might have been provided by the Latin commentaries on the *Consolation*. Otten, however, clearly admits that Alfred "read Boethius ... in the light of the teachings of Augustine and Pope Gregory,"⁸ a statement especially hard to reconcile with our present knowledge of Augustine's Neoplatonic Christianity and Gregory the Great's philosophical passages throughout the pages of his famous *Dialogues*.

Another study that discusses issues pertinent to the present research is Malcolm Godden's "Anglo-Saxons on the Mind," which explores the peculiar confluence of two traditions, classical and vernacular, in the Anglo-Saxon discussions of the human mind and soul. With regard to Alfred's vocabulary of cognition, Godden points out that similarly to Alcuin's writings on the soul (*anima*), the Old English *Boethius* attributes a very high status to the human mind (*intelligentia*, OE *gewis andgit*), a

faculty of the soul capable of reaching the heights of angelic and divine wisdom. In doing so, Alfred abandons the original division of Boethius, which reserves *intelligentia*, a direct perception of ultimate truth, exclusively to the divine sphere of understanding: "Intellectually, in his [i.e., Alfred's] view, man can reach the level of the angels."⁹

Finally, two recent studies by Paul E. Szarmach specifically contribute to the explorations of the medieval intellectual context of Old English writings on contemplation. The first study entitled "Alfred, Alcuin, and the Soul"¹⁰ focuses on the Alfredian representations of the threefold soul (one triad being *reason, memory* and *will*, another being *desire, passion* and *reason*), the influence of the vast tradition of Latin commentaries on the *Consolation*, as well as the role of Alcuin's writings in the vernacular version of the Boethius' book. Similarly, the second study by Professor Szarmach, "The *Timaeus* in Old English,"¹¹ emphasizes the importance of studying the cultural context of numerous original insertions in the vernacular text, and thus addresses the complex interplay of Alfred's translation, Boethius' original, and the intricate system of Carolingian glosses and commentaries on the Latin *Consolation*. The latter study is particularly important for its focus on the "system of understanding" to which the Latin text belongs and that the vernacular

English Language and Medieval Literature delivered at University of London King's College on March 4, 1980), reprinted as *Old English Newsletter Subsidia* 10, 1984; Whitney F. Bolton, "How Boethian is Alfred's *Boethius*?", Paul E. Szarmach (ed.), *Studies in Earlier Old English Prose*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986, 153–168; Susan Irvine, "Ulysses and Circe in King Alfred's *Boethius*: A Classical Myth Transformed," M. J. Toswell and E. M. Tyler (eds.), *Studies in English Language and Literature. 'Doubt Wisely': Papers in Honour of E. G. Stanley*, London and New York, 1996, 387–401.

⁷ Kurt Otten, *König Alfreds Boethius*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1964, 285.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁹ Malcolm Godden, "Anglo-Saxons on the Mind," Michael Lapidge and Helmut Gneuss (eds.), *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 276.

¹⁰ Paul E. Szarmach, "Alfred, Alcuin, and the Soul," Robert Boenig and Kathleen Davis (eds.), *Manuscript, Narrative, Lexicon: Essays in honor of Whitney F. Bolton*, Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2000, 127–148.

¹¹ Paul E. Szarmach, "The *Timaeus* in Old English," Christian J. Kay and Louise M. Sylvester (eds.), *Lexis and Texts in Early English: Studies presented to Jane Roberts*, Atlanta, GA: Rodopi Editions, 2001, 255–267.

translator succeeds in rendering to his mother tongue.

To the best of my knowledge, however, no research has yet been done specifically on the imagery of contemplation in Alfred's *Boethius*, nor has it yet been attempted to situate Alfred's views within a broader context of the ninth-century intellectual milieu on the Continent.

Primary sources and methodology. Although a great many passages could be selected for viewing the concept of contemplation in the Alfredian writings, the present research was limited to the Old English translation of three important meters of Boethius' *Consolation*: III.m.9, III.m.11, and IV.m.1. What unites these Latin passages is a clear expression of Platonist ideas about the soul, mind, and human attempts to reach the divine. Alfred's translation, however, is not a one-to-one paraphrase of the Latin original meters, but rather a thoughtful rendering of their meaning, taking into account not only the primary ideas of Boethius' text, but also the Carolingian tradition of its interpretation. Therefore, what is also investigated in the present research is the relevant medieval commentaries on the selected passages of the *Consolation*, as well as some other authors such as Augustine and Gregory the Great, to whose ideas on contemplation medieval commentators regularly refer.

Methodologically, the research is largely based on the philological analysis of the Anglo-Saxon texts in question. Special attention is paid to Alfred's philosophical terminology in order to achieve a more coherent view of the conceptual framework behind the diverse passages on the topic. The emerging picture is then supplemented with our knowledge of the philosophical backgrounds of the contemplative writing tradition in the early Middle Ages.

Findings. Alfred's views on the contemplative activity of the soul can be largely re-

constructed on the basis of his *Boethius*, *Metre 20, 22, and 24* (vernacular translations of the Latin *Consolation* III.m.9, III.m.11, and IV.m.1, respectively). My contention is that when rendering Boethius' ideas, Alfred mainly followed the Christian Neoplatonist framework of mind, and expressed his understanding of the *Consolation* in terms of its specific vocabulary and imagery. Much of the Late Antique Neoplatonist legacy in Boethius – ideas about soul, memory, prayer and knowledge of God – in Alfred is treated with respect to his Christian background, every thought is weighted, selected, and then situated properly in the overall “building” of his translation. A closer examination of some specific items subject to Alfred's interpretation will, therefore, help to identify not only his own interests in themes of contemplative literature but also, more generally, those of his time and his intellectual milieu.

1. Inward turning. Recurrent in Alfred's writings is an enduring Platonist doctrine of looking into one's own soul in order to reach the ultimate reality. Old English *Boethius*, *Metre 22* is a paraphrase of a “highly Platonic”¹² poem of Boethius, *Consolation* III.m.11: the mind searching for truth should turn back on itself:

- (1) *Quisquis profunda mente vestigat verum
cupitque nullis ille deviis falli,
in se revolvat intimi lucem visus
longosque in orbem cogat inflectens motus
animumque doceat, quicquid extra molitur,
suis retrusum possidere thesauris.*

(*Cons.* III.m.11, 1–6)¹³

¹² Henry Chadwick, *Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, 237.

¹³ Boethius' *Consolation* is quoted from Boethius, *The Theological Tractates, The Consolation of Philosophy*, H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester (trans.), London: Harvard University Press, 1973. English translations are my own.

[Whoever with deep mind seeks out the truth and desires not to be misled by devious ways, must turn on himself the light of his deepest vision, collect by bending into a circle his far-reaching movements, and teach his mind, whatever it is striving for outside, to grasp its treasures secreted inside.]

When rendering the passage, Alfred faithfully conveys the notion of intellectual turn inwards to the soul:

- (2) *Se þe æfter rihte mid gerece wille
inwardlice æfter spyrian,
swa deoplice þæt hit todrifan ne mæg
monna ænig...*
.....
*... he hærest sceal
secan on him selfum þæt he sume hwile
ymbutan hine æror sohte.*
(Bo Meter 22, 1–7)¹⁴

[He who desires to search with care for right inwardly, so deeply that no man can drive him away from it ... he shall seek first in himself that which before he sought around him.]

A little later, Alfred also paraphrases the idea of inner vision, a metaphor that explains the possibility of grasping with the intellect things invisible to bodily eyes:

- (3) *... he ongit siððan
yfel 7 unnet eal þæt he hæfde
on his incofan æror lange
efne swa sweotole swa he on þa sunnan mæg
eagam andweardum on locian.*
(Bo Meter 22, 14b–20)

[Then he will perceive all evil and vanity that he had in his heart for a long while, [perceive] so clearly as he would look upon the sun with his present-day eyes.]

The doctrine of inward turning alluded to in Boethius, and hence transmitted in Alfred, has its roots in the Neoplatonist belief in the divinity of souls. According to Plotinus, every soul has its higher self, which is always engaged in contemplation of the Intelligible realm: “For we are not cut off from him [i.e., Good] or separate, even if the nature of body has intruded and drawn us to itself, but we breathe and are preserved ... we exist more when we turn to him and our well-being is there... Life in that realm is the active actuality of Intellect.” (*Enn.* VI.9.9) Through contemplation, the higher part of the soul becomes identical to the divine Intellect; therefore, turning inwards, the soul turns to God, and knowing itself it arrives at all that is divine, eternal, and ultimate. Plotinus’ treatise “On the Three Primary Hypostases” (*Enn.* V.1) is a powerful recall of man to this understanding of his true nature and a guide for a Neoplatonist “ascent of the mind to God”:

Why then, when we have such great possessions, do we not consciously grasp them, but are mostly inactive in these ways, and some of us never active at all? ... If then there is to be conscious apprehension of the powers which are present in this way, we must turn our power of apprehension inwards, and make it attend to what is there... We must... keep the soul’s power of apprehension pure and ready to hear the voices from on high. (*Enn.* V.1.12)

In Alfred we find a faithful representation of that turning inwards which results in seeing the purified state of mind; clouds of “evil and vanity” removed, the inmost mind shines more brightly than the sun on a clear summer day:

¹⁴ All quotations of Alfred’s rendering of Boethius, unless stated otherwise, come from Bill Griffiths (ed.), *Alfred’s Meters of Boethius*, Pinner, Middlesex: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1994. Modern English translations are my own.

- (4) *7 h[e] eac ongít his ingeþonc
leohtre 7 berhtre þonne se leoma sie
sunnan on sumera, þonne swegles gim,
hador heofontungol, hlutrost scineð.
(Bo Metre 22, 21–24)*

[And he will also perceive his mind lighter and brighter than the ray of sun in the summer, when the gem of the sky, the clear luminary of heaven, shines most clearly.]

However, there is a certain ambiguity with the recurrent phrase of Alfred, *he ongít yfel & unnet, ongít his ingeþonc* “he will see/perceive evil and vanity,” “will perceive his mind.” The original lines of Boethius do not really mention the perceiver; they simply state that what was lately covered with the cloud of error will shine more clearly than the sun: *Dudum quod atra textit erroris nubes / lucebit ipso perspicacius Phoebus* (1.7–8). Alfred in his translation emphasizes the difference between the seer (*he*) and the seen (*yfel, unnet, ingeþonc*) that still remains after the inward turning of the soul.

A rather close parallel to the Alfredian framework of thought can be found in a description of ascent in Augustine’s *Confessions*. In book 7, chapter 17.23, Augustine indicates different stages of reality, which have to be passed in order to arrive to God: the corporeal world, the senses and the power of human reason¹⁵. However, the highest stage of ascent is

¹⁵ *Confes.* VII.17.23: *Atque ita gradatim a corporibus ad sentientem per corpus animam atque inde ad eius interiorem uim, cui sensus corporis exteriora nuntiaret... atque inde rursus ad ratiocinantem potentiam ... quae se quoque in me conperiens mutabilem erexit se ad intelligentiam suam et abduxit cogitationem a consuetudine... ut inueniret, quo lumine aspergeretur, cum sie ulla dubitatione clamaret incommutabile praeferendum esse mutabili... et peruenit ad id, quod est in ictu trepidantis aspectus.* Augustine’s passage beautifully echoes Plotinus’ words in *Enn.* V.1.3: “Since the soul is so honourable and divine a thing, be sure already that you can attain God by reason of its being of this kind, and with this as your motive ascend to him: in all certainty you will not look far; and the stages between are not many.”

not something beyond the human mind. As Gérard Verbeke, in his analysis of this particular passage, observes, it is the intellectual activity of human mind that contemplates intelligible truths that constitutes the highest level of ascent: “... saint Augustin conçoit encore un degré supérieur dans son ascension, constitué non pas par une puissance supérieure à la raison, mais par une activité plus pure de celle-ci... Essayant ainsi de remonter jusqu’à la source de son activité cognitive, l’intelligence atteint l’Être lui-même, la vérité immuable...”¹⁶

Alfred’s interpretation of Boethius is very similar to the pattern of Augustine: in its quest for truth, the soul is encouraged to turn inwards, where it can inspect its inner possessions and realize the true nature of the intellect, a light leading to another light.

2. Inner space of the soul. A related doctrine to that of the inward turn is the Christian Neoplatonist conception of the inner space of the soul: in the words of Phillip Cary, “a dimension or level of being belonging specifically to the soul, distinct from the being of God above it (and within it) and from the world of bodies outside it (and below it).”¹⁷

Alfred’s representation of human inwardness largely agrees with Boethius’ original ideas, though one can discern much of the later medieval interpretation of the *Consolation*, as well. The human soul is understood as a spacious self, a concept that belongs to the dominant Western tradition of self-interpretation, from Plato to Augustine: human thoughts, ideas and feelings are conceived as being “within”

¹⁶ Gérard Verbeke, “Connaissance de soi et connaissance de Dieu.” *Augustiniana* 4, 1954, 501.

¹⁷ Phillip Cary, *Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 4.

us, directly in opposition to the world “outside.”¹⁸ When rendering a famous passage of Boethius’ hymn *O qui perpetua* (*Cons.* III.m.9)¹⁹, Alfred pictures the soul as an entity capable of moving within the spiritual space, exiting itself and extending outside itself, contemplating, moving around, and, “most like a wheel” (OE *hweole gelicost*) returning back to its “within”:

- (5) ... *Swa deð monnes saul,*
hweole gelicost hwærfeð ymbe hy selfe,
oft smeagende ymb ðas eorðlican
drihtnes gesceafta dagum 7 nihtum:
hwilum [ymb] hi selfe secende smeað,
hwilum eft smeað ymb þone ecan God,
scippend hire... (Bo Metre 20, 210b–216a)

[So does the human soul, much like a wheel it turns around itself, often thinking day and

¹⁸ Charles Taylor observes that “strong as this partitioning of the world [i.e., the oppositions of self-understanding such as ‘inside-ouside,’ ‘within-without’ – R. Z.] appears to us, as solid as this localization may seem, and anchored in the very nature of the human agent, it is in large part a feature of our world, the world of modern, Western people. The localization is not a universal one, which human beings recognize as a matter of course... Rather it is a function of a historically limited mode of self-interpretation, one which has become dominant in the modern West... which had a beginning in time and space and may have an end.” Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989, 111.

¹⁹ Thematically, the *O qui perpetua* hymn is a succinct summary of creation from Plato’s *Timaeus*. As such, it was identified already in the early Middle Ages, which undoubtedly contributed to its popularity among the medieval commentators. Henry Chadwick calls the hymn “a nodal point in the work as a whole,” and Joachim Gruber points to its metrical centrality in the *Consolation*: various other meters of the poems in the book are grouped and ordered symmetrically around the *O qui perpetua*. Chadwick, 234; Joachim Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius De consolazione Philosophiae*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1978, 16–19.

night about those earthly creatures of the Lord; at times seeking it thinks about itself, again at times it thinks about the eternal God, its creator.]

The original lines of Boethius behind the vernacular passage allude to the myth of creation in Plato’s *Timaeus* and describe the arrangement of the World Soul around the created universe:

- (6) *Tu triplicis mediam naturae cuncta moventem*
Conectens animam per consona membra re-
solves. (Cons. 3.m.9, 13–14)

[Binding the middle element of a three-fold nature that gives motion to all things, you release the soul through the harmonious members (of the universe).]

Alfred abandons the Platonist idea of the World Soul and interprets the passage in terms of human cognition: the middle element in *Timaeus* is understood as the human soul which has its being above other creatures but below the Creator. That this particular level of existence is pertinent to the human soul is attested also by the following passage in Alfred’s translation:

- (7) ... *þonne hio ymb hire scyppend mid gescead*
smeað,
hio bið upahæfen ofer hi selfe;
ac hio bið eallunga an hire selfre
þonne hio ymb hi selfe secende smeað;
hio bið swiðe fior hire selfre beneoðan,
þonne hio þæs lænan lusað 7 wundrað
eorðlicu þing ofer ecne ræd.
(Bo Metre 20, 218–224)

[When about its Creator it (i.e., the human soul) reflects with reason, then it is raised up over itself, but it is entirely within itself when it reflects searching about itself; it is far beneath itself when it loves and admires these transitorily, earthly things more than the law eternal.]

The idea of the soul extending itself in contemplation is not an original invention of Alfred; rather, the image occurs in a number of

different contexts, which in direct or indirect way could have reached the Anglo-Saxon translator. Gregory the Great, for example, writes the following in his *Dialogues: Duobus modis... extra nos ducimur, quia aut per cogitationis lapsum sub nosmetipsos recedimus, aut per contemplationis gratiam etiam super nosmetipsos levamur* “We are led out of ourselves in two ways, either we recede below ourselves by a fault of reasoning, or through the grace of contemplation we are raised above ourselves” (*Dial.* 2.3)²⁰. Likewise, an anonymous commentary that survives in a late tenth-century manuscript CUL Kk.3.21 contains the following remarks about the *media anima* of Boethius’ hymn:

*Sunt duae illius rotae uel orbes .i. in semetipsam & in profundam mentem .i. in deum. Philosophi dicunt quod deus sit quiddam mens regens mundum & quando anima redit in se amans caduca & uana sub se est... Quando uero ad deum cogitando redit supra se est & tunc beata efficitur*²¹.

[There are two wheels or circles of it (i.e., of the soul), that is, toward itself and toward the profound mind, that is, God. Philosophers say that God is like a mind that rules the world, and when the soul loving transitory and empty things returns to itself, it is below itself... But when it returns thinking to God, it is above itself, and then it is made blessed.]

Alfred’s translation, therefore, seems to follow quite an established tradition of conceiving of the soul metaphorically in terms of spa-

ce and movement. What is interesting here is the subtle difference that exists between the Neoplatonist imagery (which is the ultimate source of the ideas quoted above) and its Christian interpretation. While in Boethius the Soul embraces the inner Mind and thus becomes the Mind (Neoplatonist deification through contemplation), in Christian writings of the early Middle Ages the distinction between the contemplating soul and the contemplated divinity remains preserved. In the words of Augustine, *intraui et uidi qualicumque oculo animae meae supra eundem oculum animae meae, supra mentem meam lucem inconmutabilem, non hanc uulgarem et conspicuam omni carni ... non hoc illa erat, sed aliud, aliud ualde ab istis omnibus* (*Conf.* 7.10.16)²².

3. Human mind in contemplation. In his account of the contemplative flight of the human mind beyond the created sky (*Bo Meter* 24, 6–23), Alfred is very careful to translate the Boethian doctrine of the winged soul transcending even the outermost sphere of the created world:

- (8) *Ac þær ic nu moste mod gefeðran,
ðinne ferðlocan, feðrum minum
oð ðæt ðu meachte þisne middangeard,
ælc eorðlic ðing, eallunga forsion.*
(*Bo Meter* 24, 4–7)

[But now I must feather the mind, your heart, with my wings, so that you would be able to leave entirely the world, every earthly thing.]

²⁰ Umberto Moricca (ed.), *Gregori Magni Dialogi, Libri IV*, Rome, 1924, 82. The English translation is my own.

²¹ MS Cambridge University Library Kk.3.21. 49^r. For a kind permission to use his copy of the microfilm of this manuscript I sincerely thank Dr. Paul E. Szarmach. The English translation is my own.

²² As Phillip Cary observes, Christian Neoplatonist tradition embraced Plotinus’ concept of inward turn, yet not without important changes. The author writes: “In order to make the soul less than divine, Augustine must adopt the metaphor that Plotinus rejects: inner vision. For that allows him to do precisely what Plotinus does not want to do – establish a gap or ontological distance between soul and God, seer and seen.” Cary, 42.

Similarly to the original text of Boethius, the winged mind reaches the limits not only of the sensible, but also of the intelligible world, passing through the ethereal sphere and attaining the divine light: *Ɔon bist þu bufan þa swifstan rodore, 7 lætst þon behindan þe þone hehstan heofon. Siððan þu miht habban þinne dæl þæs soðan leohtes*. “Then you will be above the swift sky, and leave behind you the highest heaven. Then you will be able to have your part of the true light.”²³ In the original text of Boethius, the mind literally “tramples” on the edges of the outermost sphere (*dorsaque velocis premat aetheris*) – so different is its origin from the material universe. What Alfred has to translate into the vernacular, is an ancient theory of Plato’s, the idea that only alike can know alike (*hómoion pròs hómoion*, *Tim.* 45C), which also underlies the Boethian text in question: Assisted by the wings of Philosophy (which is yet another image of Plato’s, in *Phaedrus* 249C), the mind gazes at the eternal, recollects its original dignity, and gets immersed in the divine.

One of the ways Alfred conveys the exclusive nature of intellect is through his language. Alfred seems to be very careful to select terms and use them consistently throughout his writings, which testifies to his systematic approach to the subject of philosophical contemplation. Thus, for example, to return to the study by Malcolm Godden “Anglo-Saxons on the Mind,”²⁴ Alfred’s insistence to assign a very high status to the human mind can be explained from the point of view of philosophical

contemplation of the divine. Godden draws our attention to a very interesting change that Alfred makes when translating Boethius’ *Consolation* book 5.

In the *Consolation* book 5, prose chapter 5, Boethius expounds on the theory of scale of cognition and distinguishes four different levels of understanding, each pertinent to a different nature of being. Boethius assigns those levels thus:

sensus to all animate unmoving creatures (*aliis cognitionibus destitutis immobilibus animantibus*);

imaginatio to animate moving creatures (*mobilibus beluis*);

ratio only to humankind (*humani tantum generi*);

intellectus solely to God (*sola divini*).

Translating this passage, Alfred makes several significant changes that are very important for our understanding of his concept of contemplation:

- (1) Only three distinct levels of cognition appear in Alfred’s text: *sensus* (OE *andgit*), *ratio* (OE *gesceadwisnes(s)*), and *intellectus* (OE *gewiss andgit*).
- (2) Five different natures of being are discussed: animate unmoving creatures (e.g., shellfish), beasts, humans, angels and God.
- (3) Just as in Boethius’ text, that what distinguishes men from beasts is the power of reason, OE *gesceadwisnes(s)*: *Ða men ðonne habbað ... þa micle gifte gesceadwisnesse*. “But humans have ... the great gift of reason.”²⁵
- (4) However, some men, namely, wise men, also have *intellectus*, which is primarily an angelic way of cognition:

²³ All quotations of Alfred’s prose come from Walter John Sedgefield, ed. *King Alfred’s Old English Version of Boethius De Consolatione Philosophiae*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968. The reference is give to page and line numbers; Modern English translations are my own. Sedgefield, 105, 14–16.

²⁴ See p. 4, n. 9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 146, 8–10.

- (9) *Englas þon habbað gewiss angit... Ac þæt is earmlic þ[æt] se mæsta dæl monna ne secð no þ[æt] þ[æt] him forgifen is, þ[æt] is gesceadwisness; ne þ[æt] ne secð þæt him ofer is, þ[æt] is þæt englas habbað 7 wise men; þ[æt] is gewis andgit²⁶.*

[Angels have intellect... But it is miserable that the greatest part of men do not seek that which is given to them, that is, reason; nor do they seek what is above them, that which angels and wise men have, that is, intellect.]

Alfred explains that the difference between human *gesceadwisnes(s)* and angelic *gewis andgit* lies primarily in the latter's ability of sustained contemplation; in another place Alfred calls angelic mind the *untwiogende andgit*, "undoubting intellect,"²⁷ which stands in opposition to the human mind that grasps little being free from doubt. Nevertheless, the human mind or human reason is called to rise above and return in contemplation to its original homeland:

- (10) *Ac uton nu habban ure mod up swa swa we yfemest mægen wið þæs hean hrofes þæs hehstan andgites, þ[æt] ðu mæge hrædlicost cumon 7 eðelicost to þinre agenre cyððe þonan þe ðu ær come. Þær mæg þin mod 7 þin gesceadwisnes geseon openlice þ[æt] þ[æt] hit nu ymb tweoð ælces þinges...²⁸*

[But let us now elevate our mind the highest we can towards the high roof of the highest intellect, so that you may come most swiftly and easily to your own native place from which you came before. There your mind and your reason may see openly that what it now doubts about all things.]

What Alfred seems to be doing, in his rendering, is making an old Neoplatonist distinction between the higher (contemplative) and

the lower (active) capacities of the soul. To designate human cognitive powers in general, he uses OE *mod*; however, when the context requires to express the elevation of the human mind to divine or angelic intelligence, Alfred uses OE *gescead(wisnes)*. Thus in *Meter* 20, 218, for example, the soul seeks God *mid gescade* (see extract 7 above), whereas in *Meter* 22, 44, *gescad* is again used as a means to recollect the eternal truth:

- (11) *Hu mæg ænig man andsware findan ðinga æniges, þegen mid gesceade, þeah hi[r]e rinca hwilc rihtwislice æfter fringe... (Bo Meter 22, 43–46a)*

[How can anyone find an answer to anything, a man with reason, inquired rightly by some people.]

It is here that Alfred comes closest to the Plotinian idea of deification through contemplation: as long as the contemplating mind can rise to the level of angelic or divine intelligence, the essential kinship between soul and divinity can be recognized. In the language of Platonists, "higher means closer to God"²⁹; therefore, the higher the mind flies, the more deeply it becomes immersed in the divine, the closer it gets to its original homeland³⁰. Further research based on a wider variety of Alfredian texts may perhaps find an answer to this question, and thus open yet a wider perspective on the Anglo-Saxon understanding of intellectual contemplation of the divine.

Conclusions. Alfred's translation of Boethius offers much evidence on the ninth-century understanding of the contemplative activity

²⁹ Cary, 55.

³⁰ John Scottus Eriugena, a near contemporary of Alfred, in his *Homily on the prologue to the Gospel of John*, thus words the state of deification reached by the contemplating mind: *Non ergo Iohannes erat homo, sed plus-*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 146, 10, 14–16.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 146, 19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 146, 26–31.

of the human soul. The present research was limited to three issues pertinent to the Christian Neoplatonist doctrine of the intellectual, or philosophical, contemplation of the divine: the idea of looking inwards into the soul to reach the divine (the inward turning), a related concept of the inner self where the soul sees the intelligible light (the inner space), and finally the complex notion of the human mind that can attain the heights of divine intellect (the mind in contemplation). Although Alfred follows Boethius' text rather closely, the changes introduced in his translation arise from a definite philosophical context and are in essential agreement with the wider tradition of Christian Neoplatonist writings on contemplation, a tradition that similarly modified Late Antique thought on which it relied. Alfred's own fascination with the subject shines through every passage he writes, thus enkindling his truly philosophical inquiry with the deepest human desire to seek and find the way back to God, attain the Source of light, and reach the ultimate Truth.

Annotation

The study explores recurrent imagery of philosophical or intellectual contemplation in the Old English translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. Three aspects of the intellectual quest for the divine are considered in the paper: first, the doctrine of the inward turning to oneself in order to reach the divine; second, the idea of inwardness, or the inner space, which determines the scope of the cognitive activity of the soul; third, the notion of the human mind as the primary tool for the philosophical contemplation of the divine. The investigation of the backgrounds and contexts of the relevant passages of King Alfred's *Boethius* allows to situate the ninth-century translation within a wider framework of early medieval Christian Neoplatonism, and to see the continuity in thought from the Enneadic scale of cognition to the imagery of spiritual flight in the Anglo-Saxon rendering of the Latin book.

quam homo, quando ad seipsum et omnia quae sunt superavit, et ineffabili sapientiae uirtute, purissimoque mentis acumine subuectus, in ea quae super omnia sunt... ingressus est. Non enim aliter potuit ascendere in deum, nisi prius fieret deus. "Therefore, John was not a man, but more than a man, when he went beyond himself and all that is, and, carried by the virtue of wisdom and the sharpest point of his understanding, he entered that what exist above all... He could not have reached God, unless before he had not become a god." PL 122, col. 285D. The English translation is mine.