

### fortiter suaviter

**Abstract:** A happy phrase used by Lady Philosophy in Boethius' *Consolation* has often been quoted as a meagre but significant indication of Christian belief. But it seems rather to be the normal expression of a Neoplatonic sentiment about the combination of power and effortlessness in divine action. And the pleasure expressed by Boethius over the verbal felicity simply echoes the emphasis placed on appropriate dignity of idiom in Eleatic and Platonic descriptions of the divine.

(I) "It is therefore the supreme goodness which rules all things strongly and orders them sweetly."<sup>1</sup>

This sentence occurs at a pivotal point in Boethius' dialogue with Lady Philosophy. Their discussion had started with his complaint about the injustice of his being imprisoned and condemned as if blind Fortune ruled the universe. The Lady gradually steers him through arguments about the instability and illusion of what men generally regard as good, such as wealth, power, esteem. The prisoner at last comes to fasten firmly on to one abiding conviction, that, despite the bitter appearances to the contrary, a supreme goodness coordinates all things, including the vagaries of Fate. From that central stance the dialogue can go on to explain the nature of Providence, its control over Fate, its compatibility with human free-will, its rewarding of moral effort and prayer.

A Christian version of the crucial sentence has been noted in the Latin church liturgy, in an Advent antiphon with a memorable plain-chant tune. I translate it from the *Liber Usualis* (a more complete text than that given in Bieler's edition of the *Consolatio*): "O Wisdom who have come from the mouth of the Most High, reaching from end to end strongly, sweetly, and disposing all things, come to teach us the way of prudence."<sup>2</sup> The antiphon is evidently based on the Vulgate Book of Wisdom, the *Sapientia Salamonis* (8, 1),<sup>3</sup> which in turn was a close translation from the Greek Septuagint: "Wisdom stretches from end to end strongly and disposes all things gently."<sup>4</sup>

Because of such a hallowed similarity the Boethian sentence has always attracted much attention, and has often been hailed as unique evidence of Boethius' Christian faith. This reaction can in fact be traced back to the early

1 Boeth. cons. 3, 12, 22 *est igitur . . . summum bonum quod regit cuncta fortiter suaviterque disponit.*

2 Liber Usualis, antiphona ad diem xvii decembris: *O sapientia quae ex ore altissimi prodisti, attingens a fine usque ad finem fortiter, suaviter, disponensque omnia, veni ad docendum nos viam prudentiae.*

3 Vet. Lat. sap. 8, 1 *sapientiam autem non vincit malitia, attingit enim a fine usque ad finem fortiter et disponit omnia suaviter.*

4 LXX Wi. 8, 1: διατείνει δὲ ἀπὸ πέρας εὐρώστως καὶ διοικεῖ τὰ πάντα χρηστῶς.

editions. Nine modern scholars are quoted ad locum in Gruber's commentary. One of them, Adrian Fortescue, who produced a very attractively printed edition of the *Consolatio*, sees here its only certain quotation ("certissima citatio") from the Bible. Echoing this enthusiastically Chadwick demurs at "Gruber's surprising reluctance to confirm a reference to Wisdom viii, 1", a reference which Chadwick himself considers "as good as certain". He explains: "Boethius not only welcomes the Lady Philosophy's statement but expresses particular pleasure at the (biblical) words in which her reassurance is expressed." "Why should Boethius take such pleasure in 'haec ipsa verba'? The only natural answer is that the words come from ... Wisdom, ... as if he were saying ...: 'Fancy you of all people, knowing the Bible?'"<sup>5</sup>

I would rather start from the fact that the incantatory words are set as coping-stone to a structure of philosophic argument. That argument begins with Platonic reminiscence of an anterior reflection that unity is identical with goodness and happiness, that in order to survive things naturally desire unity, and that therefore what the ensemble of things seeks is the supreme goodness, the *summum bonum*, the ultimate happiness and unity. The sheer diversity of the dissentient elements we notice in the world presupposes a single overall élan, from unity and towards unity, since all the diverse cosmic processes depend for their survival upon the coordinating power, "whatever it is",<sup>6</sup> to which by universal consent men have given the name God.<sup>7</sup> That divine unity is necessarily the supreme goodness, the supreme happiness, for the divine being enjoys a total self-sufficiency, undisturbed by anything external, and so is able to coordinate all things by a power that is unlimited because of that absolute independence. Since the divine happiness is so independent and ultimate, transcending all lesser modes of goodness, it must surely be the very helm which steers the universe. Everything aspires, in greater or less degree, to that ultimate well-being and accordingly is governed readily by it; in practice nothing really opposes that divine pleasure, any recalcitrance being powerless. Evil and misery therefore must be regarded as less than real. It is, then, this supreme goodness, this *summum bonum*, which disposes all things with easy harmony. An enchanting conclusion.

5 Fortescue ed. ad cons. 3, 12, n. 15. H. Chadwick, *JTS* 30, 1979, 572–573; Boethius, Oxford 1981, 237–238.

6 *hoc quidquid est quo condita manent* (cons. 3, 12, 8). This agnostic turn of phrase, echoed elsewhere (cons. 1 carm. 5, 43), sounds distinctly unbiblical. It is however quite classical: Heraclit. VS 22 B 32; Aesch. Ag. 160; Eurip. Hipp. 193, Tr. 884.

7 *usitato cunctis vocabulo deum nomino* (cons. 3, 12, 8): this reference "ex consensu humano" is also a fragment of Greek which lodged in the tradition. It is found as early as the Presocratic Diogenes of Apollonia, VS 64 B 5, in Simp. in cael. 284b 3, and as late as Anselm and Aquinas (e.g. *summa theol.* 1, 3: *causam primam ... quam omnes deum nominant*).

Thus looked at as a whole the idiom of the argument is far from biblical. It is strongly redolent of ancient philosophy and one is confident of finding it abundantly illustrated in Greek philosophic literature, even though we no longer possess all the Neoplatonic *libri Platoniorum*.

Going back to the concluding sentence which so charmed Boethius we can observe at a glance that not all of its words enjoy biblical parallel. The subject of the sentence, *summum bonum*, is of course pure ancient philosophy, not the Wisdom of the Bible. *regit cuncta*, “rules all things”, is not the same as the biblical “stretches from end to end”, (though we can actually find parallel for both of those phrases in Greek philosophy<sup>8</sup>). *disponit* represents a common Greek description for divine government of the universe.<sup>9</sup> The only closely parallel phrase left is *fortiter suaviterque*, disposes “strongly and sweetly”. The eloquent adverbs deserve further scrutiny.

(II) FORTITER. In Platonist philosophy the idea of God as the supreme unity or goodness entails the attribute of supreme strength, of omnipotence. Being the supreme one and good implies *sufficiencia*, which means a complete self-sufficiency and therefore a happiness in which nothing is lacking and all desires are fulfilled, because there is total independence of externals. A living mind-will which is self-constituted and never interfered with externally has to be omnipotent.<sup>10</sup> Even internally there is no discursive transition from one state of divine mind to another, or from potency to act. All coalesces in a pure simplicity. Such absolute simplicity which knows no inner fluctuation or division and needs no outer sustenance or refreshment or material or instrument, is evidently indestructible and enjoys total power over all lesser beings. Its unity is so intense that it ‘appropriates’ all the fluctuating externals, attracting them into its order, as described in the cosmogonic myth in Plato’s *Timaeus*.<sup>11</sup> And for that process it does not have to plan forward or provide. It is independent of outside processes and indeed of interior ones too; any hint of these would negate the pure oneness. This had set the theme of a famous lecture by Plato which has not survived, arguing that the One is the Good. In Neoplatonism a new emphasis on this divine unity and independent omnipotence is launched by Plotinus and echoes throughout the literature of the later Greek schools.

When we come to Boethius we discover that this Greek doctrine of divine independence is present not just here in this impressive sentence but spreading into other arguments. God, he says, “acts without external assistance”. “God

8 Plat. rep. 617 a ff. Nothing eludes the divine influence.

9 διατίθεται, διοικεῖ and compounds.

10 Simp. in phys. 22, 20 ff. τὸ πάντων κράτιστον καὶ ἄριστον Θεός; cons. 3, 9, 11.

11 Plat. Tim. 30 a πᾶν ὅσον ἦν ὁρατὸν παραλαβών.

does not lapse into externals”.<sup>12</sup> God “is in need of nothing”, and “is the all-strong because he has need of nothing”. Similar Greek nuances also occur in the school ‘disciplines’ translated by Boethius. For instance: “those objects are said to have true existence (*esse*) which keep themselves in their proper power by the resources of their own nature”.<sup>13</sup>

The strength of divine action is sometimes stressed by the Greeks in poetic metaphors of force. “The wide heaven is shaken” (Hesiod). “The god who shakes all things has no visible shape”: that poetic phrase is preserved by the late anthologist Stobaeus and ascribed by him to Socrates’ follower Xenophon. We find this forceful idiom even earlier, in the poetry of the Eleatics. “God hurls all things into motion” says Xenophanes.<sup>14</sup> Yet, as Diels remarks, this violent God as described by Xenophanes paradoxically resembles the “motionless god” of Aristotle, who “moves all by mind”. The Eleatic poet distinguishes the quiet immortals (Θεοί) from the whirling universe of perishable things (τὰ πάντα *ibid.*). This notion of divine strength persists into the later Greek tradition and is noticeable in the phrase of Virgil about the the universal spirit that “shakes the material mass”, *mens agitat molem*.<sup>15</sup> These Greek images of force appear in various phrases of Boethius.

Mind is stronger than any of the outer activity it induces. It is a more powerfully efficient cause than any material object passively awaiting impression. Consciousness is the source which imparts strength to action enabling an agent to attend, discern, arrange, innovate. With that goes desire to act, “stronger than hand or limb”. In its highest dimension it is *Nous*, the divine mind, aware of the Good and aware of all Forms, and superior to discursive reason, (διάνοια), or to mere opinion (δόξα). Divine power resides not in physical but in mental force, in dynamic awarenesses, thoughts, species, forms, (νοήματα, εἶδη). Xenophanes calls this divine power “the force of insight”, (νόου φρενί), borrowing that poetic phrase from Homer (Xenophanes VS 21 B 25 [Hom. Il. 9, 600]).

The divine *Nous* activates everything “by itself”, “by thought alone”, and so as Plato adds, it “never loses its power” (Plat. rep. 518 e; Plot. 3, 2, 2, 17). Xenophanes thinks of it as invisible and silent; yet it “is all eye and all ear”, is a total consciousness (VS 21 B 24). By its mental vision and by that alone it is creative, “thinks all things into being”.<sup>16</sup> This supreme *Nous* comprehends the

12 cons. 3, 12, 11 *nullis extrinsecus adminiculis per se solum cuncta disponit*; Eurip. Herc. f. 1345; Plot. 3, 7, 6, 35.

13 cons. 3, 12, 37; Procl. in Tim.1, 255; Boeth. arithm. 1, 1.

14 cons. 1 carm. 5, 3 *rapido caelum turbine versas*; Stob. 2, 4, 19 Meinecke; Xenophanes VS 21 B 25.

15 Diels poet. phil. frg. 43; Verg. Aen. 6, 727.

16 cons. 5, 6, 43 *scientiae vis . . . modum omnibus ipsa constituit*; Plat. Phaed. 97 c; Plot. 3, 9, 1, 27; Simp. in phys. 22, 22.

lower modes of awareness, such as reasoning and opinion, adapting their data into its own inner force (cons. 5, 4, 31; Xenophanes VS 21 B 34, 4). Unlike discursive reasoning, which relies on limits ( $\delta\omicron\rho\omicron\iota$ ) and definitions and transitions, Nous is limitless and all-comprehending for it sees all at once by immediate intuition ( $\pi\rho\omicron\sigma\beta\omicron\lambda\eta$ ).<sup>17</sup> Productive action is only a weakened form of that intense contemplation (Plot. 3, 8, 4, 40), a sort of ‘inebriated’ inattention, an attenuation or relaxation.<sup>18</sup>

*Nous* is translated by Boethius as *intellegentia* or *mens*, discursive reason as *intellectus*. *Intellegentia* is “the vital awareness that has no need of anything else”.<sup>19</sup> It is a “force of knowledge”. So the phrase *regit fortiter* concentrates the theme of the whole Boethian prosa that action emanating from the supreme *intellegentia* is omnipotent action, irresistibly annihilating evil. The force pervading the cosmos is emphatically described in Platonic manner as a thought-force. Plato’s “Nous the orderer” is the same as the Boethian divinity “ruling the world by mind”.<sup>20</sup> The strength of the supreme goodness resides in its simple unity. It is the only pure entity. Everything else is mixed, is itself plus something else, and is indeed diminished by that addition. The divine by contrast has all its power within itself, needs no outer instrument, operates by its own essence, “by thought alone without outside props”. That is to say, fortiter.

(III) SVAVITER. This Boethian word is in fact simply picking up a theme that recurs throughout Greek thought, namely the effortlessness, the “lack of labour”, in divine action. Early on this was an Eleatic doctrine. God is enthroned absolutely still at the centre of the universe, “moved in no respect”,<sup>21</sup> and his influence works evenly and sweetly in all directions from that centre. This is a corollary of the concept of divine independence. Divine life is an unalloyed intuitive consciousness, a noetic energy which never lapses into anything external, “has no external aim”, and is never, as Boethius stresses, “in need of another”.<sup>22</sup> Hence the emphasis on the divine calm. This Eleatic emphasis is recurrent in Greek literature: we find it in a line of Aeschylus: “with spiritual

17 cons. 5, 2, 11; 5, 6, 22 *uno suo mentis intuitu*; David in Porph. 60, 6  $\delta$  γὰρ νοῦς ἀπλῆ προσβολῆ πάντα γινώσκει.

18 cons. 5, 6, 12 *deficit in motum*; Plot. 3, 8, 8, 32; 3, 8, 4, 40.

19 Boeth. in isag. 7, 15 *nullius indigens vivax mens*. cons. 5, 6, 43 *scientiae vis . . . cuncta complectens*; Plat. Phaed. 97 c.

20 cons. 3 carm. 9, 8 *mundum mente gerens*; Plat. Phaed. 97 c  $\delta$  γὰρ νοῦς ἔστω  $\delta$  διακοσμῶν.

21 Xenophanes VS 21 B 26 κινούμενος οὐδέν.

22 cons. 3, 2, 14 *bonorum omnium status nec alieni egens sed sibi ipse sufficiens*; Aristot. mund. 397 b.

beings everything is effortless.”<sup>23</sup> Thereafter ‘effortlessness’ (ἀπονία), is a regular feature in Platonist “discourse about the divine” (θεολογία).

The outer movement of the cosmos may seem a whirling vortex, a turbulent rush of fate, but the central force because of its strength balances all evenly and sweetly, and the total action is like that of a child’s top which ‘sleeps’ as it spins, or, in Dante’s vision, like the wheel of divine love which spins evenly: “siccome rota che egualmente è mossa”.<sup>24</sup> Divine omnipotence acts ‘gently’, says Proclus. It can afford to produce its effects with total ease. It is “unperturbed and serene”.<sup>25</sup> Divine ‘leisure’, ease and ‘generosity’ of action,<sup>26</sup> is natural to such utter self-identity, in which a totality of life coalesces, interpenetrates, in the durée of eternity.

The generation of the entire universe issues from that stability of the divine mind.<sup>27</sup> Emphasis on the divine quiet recurs in the Greek school literature. In Xenophon’s memoirs Socrates notes the quietly hidden nature of the universal creator: “He who co-ordinates and holds together the universe is invisible”. And a scholion adds: “He who shakes all things while himself remaining quiet makes it clear enough that he is great and powerful; but what his form is like he keeps hidden”.<sup>28</sup> Plotinus says much the same: “Its very non-activity activates magnificently” (3, 2, 1, 44). Closer still to Boethius is Simplicius speaking of “this common concept we have of the effortlessness and happiness of God” (in cael. 284 b 3).

One may well ask how it is that this quiet unextended divinity gives rise to any extension or motion at all. Rest and motion are of course relative terms and strictly speaking neither is applicable to the divine unity. So Platonic explanations of motion have to stay within the realm of metaphor. “Everything that is fully mature generates”. “God is without jealousy”. Creation is a sort of ‘overflow’ or ‘circumradiation’ which does not in any way modify its self-sufficient source. That omnipotence creates serenely, “by little more than an act of presence”. Motion occurs only ‘outside’ the eternal and does not affect its inner tranquillity.

23 Aesch. Supp. 99 βίαν δ’ οὔτιν ἐξοπλίζει· πᾶν ἄπονον δαμονίων.

24 Plat. rep. 617 a 7 ἡρέμα περιφέρεισθαι.

25 Procl. Theol. Plat. 60; Plot. 5, 8, 7, 24 f. ἐποιεῖτο δὲ ἀψοφητί, . . . διὸ καὶ ἄπονος ἡ δημιουργία, 3, 2, 2, 16 ἀτρεμῆς καὶ ἡσυχος.

26 cons. 3 carm. 9, 5 f. *summi forma boni livore carens*; Plat. Tim. 29 e; rep. 500 a 4; Eurip. Alc. 1135.

27 cons. 4, 6, 7 *omnium generatio rerum . . . ex divinae mentis stabilitate*.

28 Schol. Xen. mem. 4, 3, 13 ὡς μὲν μέγας τις καὶ δυνατὸς φανερόν· ὅποῖος δὲ τὴν μορφὴν ἀφανής. Eurip. Tr. 885–888 ὅστις ποτ’ εἶ σύ, δυστόπαστος εἰδέναι, / Ζεὺς, εἶτ’ ἀνάγκη φύσεος εἶτε νοῦς βροτῶν, / προσηυξάμην σε· πάντα γὰρ δι’ ἀψόφου / βαίνων κελεύθου κατὰ δίκην τὰ θνήτ’ ἄγεις.

Note that the Boethian word *suaviter* is not an extraneous borrowing. In this summarising sentence its force is to recapitulate the earlier point in the *prosa* about divinity's effortless conquest to which recalcitrant evil 'willingly' submits; it recalls that previous word *voluntaria*, which explains why the divine omnipotence is in fact a *benigna fortitudo*. It is therefore intrinsic to the structure of the main philosophic argument, as Boethius would insist, *intra rei ambitum*.

We find the Neoplatonic scholastics quoting a verse of Xenophanes the Eleatic, which perfectly expresses that Boethian theme of easy omnipotence in the divinity: "Without effort it sways the whole universe by the power of pure thought".<sup>29</sup>

(IV) Whether we can be sympathetic or not to this ancient conception will depend, I think, on whether we can go along with the idea of an unextended, undimensional, incorporeal kind of reality. That idea is at the root of Platonist thinking. The totally unextended is the totally one, a single awareness which is supreme and self-contained, and therefore omnipotent. The nature of this awareness, which organises all things with sweet ease, is spelled out by the Greek philosophers, as it is here in Boethius' next book, in the idea of *aeternitas*. Eternity in their context is not just endless time : it is not time at all. It is rather the spaceless, the dimensionless and therefore timeless reality of the divine awareness, that vital intuition that is ever abiding, ever calm, ever 'present'. The intuition is a living force, the divine life itself, "life without limitation, possessed all at once in fullest perfection",<sup>30</sup> which, in the completeness and happiness and unfailing force of its intuitive self-regard, comprehends, "gathers together" all other goods.<sup>31</sup>

This all-controlling divine intuition which does not traverse temporal stages but is instantaneously complete is reverently described by the Greeks in the word *αἰών* which Boethius renders as *aevum* or *aeternitas*. It is but another name for the divine mind-being. A full elucidation of the idea had been given by Plotinus, and the notion recurs in his scholastic successors. The eternal is distinguished sharply from the merely everlasting. Boethius reproduces this Neoplatonic distinction between the timeless-spaceless and the temporal-spatial. He is evidently following Greek source material closely.

He says that the notion can be clarified by consideration of temporal happenings.<sup>32</sup> This had been done in Greek. Plotinus had stated that if we could understand the day-to-day time we are familiar with we could then, by anamne-

29 Xenophanes VS 21 B 25 ἀλλ' ἀπάνευθε πόνοιο νόου φρενὶ πάντα κραδαίνει.

30 cons. 5, 6, 8; Plot. 3, 7, 3, 36.

31 cons. 3, 2, 3; Plat. def. 412 d 10; Plot. 3, 7, 3, 5.

32 cons. 5, 6, 4; Plot. 3, 7, 1.

sis, begin to understand the eternal. Temporal permanence can at best achieve only perpetuity, constant succession, but not eternity. Its mobility cannot grasp the divine stillness, cannot embrace completeness of life by an effortless standing still. So temporal perpetuity fails to emulate the divine consciousness which is totally quiet and at ease simply because it “transcends all motion”.<sup>33</sup>

The Neoplatonic notion of timelessness implies that since for the divine mind there is no “has been” or “will be”, for the intuition is a praesens veritas, God does not dispose of things of the world by any anticipatory choice (προάρεσις Plot. 6, 8, 17), but by an all-simple, all-present, all-inclusive, willing (βούλησις Plot. 6, 8, 13, 7), or as Boethius puts it, “not by longevity of time but by the property of simplicity of nature”.<sup>34</sup> The same notion appears too in the Latin commentary on the *Timaeus* composed from Greek Porphyrian material by Chalcidius: “The origin and seat of the divine genera, the everlasting groupings, is not in temporal anticipation but in a transcendence of dignity”.<sup>35</sup> This echoes Plotinus’ rhetorical question about the supreme One: “What prevents him from knowing, without any change in himself, that which changes?”<sup>36</sup> The divine knowing comes not by discursive reasoning but by immediate insight.<sup>37</sup>

The source of the Boethian distinction between eternity and perpetuity is evidently the Greek school literature. The schoolman Simplicius explains how “the eternal is not just endless time; it is not time at all; that which endures over time is merely the perpetual.”<sup>38</sup> The fons et origo of this school doctrine is of course the emphatic distinction drawn by Plotinus that the still life of Mind-Being is eternity, and the mobile life of Soul is time. “Life which is all together and complete, without interval, in all respects, is eternity”.<sup>39</sup> Limited by our spatial-temporal nature we cannot really define this reality. But “if one were to describe it as limitless life we would be close to a definition” (Plot. 3, 7, 5, 25). This life without limit is exactly Boethius’ *interminabilis vita*.

33 cons. 5, 6, 7; 5, 6, 13 *quoniam vero manere non potuit, infinitum temporis iter arripuit.*

34 cons. 5, 6, 11 *neque deus conditis rebus antiquior videri debet temporis quantitate sed simplicis potius proprietate naturae.*

35 Chalc. Tim. 91, 13 Waszink *non in anticipatione temporis sed dignitatis eminentia.*

36 cons. 5, 6, 15; Plot. 4, 3, 25, 22.

37 cons. 5, 2, 1; 5, 6, 22 *uno . . . suo mentis intuitu . . . dinoscit*; 5, 4, 11; David in Porph. 60, 6.

38 cons. 5, 6, 6; Simp. in phys. 739, 17 τὸ γὰρ αἰδιον οὐκ ἐν χρόνῳ.

39 cons. 5, 6, 8 *quod igitur interminabilis vitae plenitudinem totam pariter comprehendit ac possidet, cui neque futuri quicquam absit nec praeteriti fluxerit, id aeternum esse iure perhibetur*; Plat. Phileb. 60 c; Plot. 3, 7, 3, 36; Simp. in phys. 790, 93; cons. 5, 6, 4 *aeternitas igitur est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio.*



Such unlimited life enjoys “undivided power that needs nothing in any respect” (Plot. 3, 7, 6, 35).

The calm rest of eternity is the source of all cosmic motion, and therefore of time which is the measure of that motion. Boethius prays Platonically to the divinity: “You order time to go out from eternity, and yourself remaining still, grant movement to all things”.<sup>40</sup> The thought made its way into later Christian hymnody

O God, creation’s secret force,  
Thyself unmoved, all motion’s source . . .

The divine instant of vision (pro-noia, pro-videntia) creates the entire material cosmos. It attracts all material turbulences into its quiet order, sweetly and lovingly. In the apposite dictum of William Blake, “eternity is in love with the productions of time”.

(V) HAEC IPSA VERBA. “How great, I answered, is my delight, not only in the conclusion your arguments have reached but still more in the very words you have used.” Boethius’ reaction to the idiom used by Lady Philosophy echoes a common concern of some Greek philosophers, that words must be adequate to their subject, and words about ultimate principles must have a quality of reverence befitting their theme. Any falsehood in this respect would be impiety. This was a central concern of Plato. Discourse about the divine (θεολογία), he said, must be appropriate, purified from the excesses of poetic mythology, for the Good is superior to everything, even to Being itself, in dignity and power. However difficult it may be for humans to avoid the illusion of evil God has to be described “as he is”, that is, as the Good.<sup>41</sup> And Lady Philosophy has here been arguing Platonically that God is indeed the highest good, the summum bonum. Appropriate language seems so paramount to Socrates that he even begins argument with a prayer to obtain it. Philosophic persuasion always needs to be appropriately quiet and paramythic, not coercive.<sup>42</sup>

But God is the totally simple, the eternal. The notion of eternity, of an absolutely simple consciousness, at once raises this problem of language: without language there can be no teaching, no philosophy at all. But the unitary nature of eternity would demand a totally unitary mode of expression, which would nevertheless have to connote the rich dynamism of divine creativity.

I considered that in the language of a god every word would enunciate the infinite concatenation of facts, and not in an implicit but in an

40 cons. 3 carm. 9, 2 f. *qui tempus ab aevo / ire iubet stabilisque manens das cuncta moveri*.

41 Plat. rep. 378 c–380 b; 509 b οὐκ οὐσίας ὄντος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ἀλλ’ ἔτι ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας πρεσβεῖα καὶ δυνάμει ὑπερέχοντος, Epin. 980 b.

42 cons. 4, 1, 1 *haec cum Philosophia . . . leniter suaviterque cecinisset*; Plat. rep. 499 c; Epist. 7, 344 b; Plot. 5, 8, 11, 4.

explicit manner, and not progressively but instantaneously. . . . A god, I reflected, ought to utter only a single word and in that word absolute fullness. (Borges, *Labyrinths*, 205)

Philosophic concern over adequate language reflects this basic and seemingly superhuman task. Perhaps the true philosopher can speak only in hints, metaphors, “likely accounts”, if not indeed observing total silence. All talk about the divine is playing the fool, but without fool’s language there is no public worship either. The unique omniscience both admits and does not admit any man-made divine name.<sup>43</sup>

Plato’s insistence on appropriate expression had been a legacy to him from the Eleatics. Xenophanes had based his arguments on concepts and descriptions that “are becoming” (ἐπιπρέπει): “It is not fitting that god should move here and there”. The same feature is evident in Empedocles, using honorific epithets about the swiftness and strength of the cosmic first principle: “a holy and ineffable mind, with swift thoughts darting through the whole universe”. His idea was taken up later by the Greek poets. Euripides, a favourite with the philosophers, (Lady Philosophy calls him “my Euripides”, cons. 3, 7, 6) demands a notion of a God that is “genuinely God”, not just “these wretched sayings of bards”. So there developed a Greek insistence that theological language should be ‘fitting’ (πρέπον), “worthy of God” (θεοπρεπές), with a due quality of reverence (σεμνότης).

Philosophic concern for fittingness of language is first emphasized by these Eleatic thinkers. Aristotle remarked on the tone of solemnity adopted by the Eleatics even when mentioning such totally abstract principles as Limit and Unlimit, because though these principles were not gods they were still exalted and ultimate. And he himself advised the highest reverence in discussing the divine. The inadequacy of human language for description of the divine had been a major preoccupation in Eleatic thought. Humans fall into imagining that the gods have human bodies, or even indeed clothing. Just so animals if it were possible for them to have a god would give that god an animal body. But the sort of body gods might have, or the sort of mind, could not possibly resemble the human sort.<sup>44</sup> If we are to use human words at all, thus lapsing into quantitative description, we should speak abstractly and describe the divine form as spherical, and the divine material as the subtle fifth element, αἰθήρ.<sup>45</sup> This view was held by Diogenes of Apollonia who as regards language called for

43 Heraclit. VS 22 B 32 ἐν τῷ σοφῶν μούνον λέγεσθαι οὐκ ἐθέλει καὶ ἐθέλει Ζητῶς ὄνομα.

44 Xenophanes VS 21 B 26; B 1; Emped. VS 31 B 134; Eurip. Herc. f. 1346 αἰδῶν οἶδε δύστηνοι λόγοι. Aristot. phys. 207a 18; de phil. fr. 14 Walzer; Xenophanes VS 21 B 14–15, 23.

45 cons. 3, 12, 37; Parmenides VS 28 B 8 ; Plat. Sophist. 244 c; cons. 4, 6, 38; Diog. Apoll. VS 64 B 5.

“simple and solemn elucidation”.<sup>46</sup> That there can be a superhuman etherial body is quoted elsewhere by Boethius, piously raising his tone and quoting a Greek oracular source “more excellent than me”.

Long after Plato and Aristotle we find that the Roman poet Lucretius, though reproducing the materialist language of the Greek atomists, reprehends those who “deface immortal things by mortal language”; they are punished, he says, like the giants who once assaulted heaven.<sup>47</sup> So here it is no accident that Lady Philosophy on being complimented about the sublimity of her words immediately recalls the rebellion of the giants and how the “sweet power” (*begnina fortitudo*) of heaven contained it.<sup>48</sup> This is a fairly clear indication that she is speaking from a Greek context similar to that used by Lucretius. She adds an ethical corollary that conflict of reasoning can produce the sparks of truth.<sup>49</sup>

Desire for reverence gave rise to the Greek scholastic habit of hymnodic quotation in the course of philosophic argument. A Platonic example of oracular quotation may be seen at *Laws* 715 e: “God, as the ancient saying puts it . . .”. The later Greek schoolmen frequently quote Orphic verses, or Eleatic phrases, or oracles. The tendency is evident in Boethius, who retains the original Greek words of such ‘scriptures’.

It is this Greek concern over verbal reverence which Boethius is actually repeating. He spells out the stylistic preference at the very beginning of the *prosa*: the language has to be Platonic, the language of reminiscence: “I emphatically agree with Plato”.<sup>50</sup> The style will have to be endowed with philosophic charm, with “the true Muse”, “my own Muses”, “the Muse of Plato”.<sup>51</sup> If only we can make our language theologically appropriate then it will also be stylistically appropriate. This concern over correctness of language about the divine is not unique to this *prosa*. It is found in other Boethian contexts about the sublime where Biblical background has never been suspected by scholars. For instance, on the lofty theme of divine foreknowledge: “that God should think that any things will inevitably take place which possibly will not take place is impious, not only to think but also to express in words”.<sup>52</sup> “We most fittingly (*dignissime*) confess that he is the best of all beings” (*cons.* 3, 10, 13).

46 Diog. Apoll. VS 64 B 1 ἐρμηνείαν ἀπλήν καὶ σεμνήν.

47 Xenophanes VS 21 B 1, 21–24; Plat. *Sophist.* 246a; Lucr. 5, 121.

48 *cons.* 3, 12, 60; Xenophanes VS 21 B 1, 21–24; Plot. 5, 8, 7, 24.

49 *cons.* 3, 12, 25; Plat. *rep.* 435 a, *Epist.* 7, 341 b, 344 b.

50 *cons.* 3, 12, 38; in *herm. comm. sec. p.* 246, 20; cf. Plat. *Tim.* 29 b, *Sophist.* 259 e, *Leg.* 967 d.

51 *cons.* 3 *carm.* 11, 15; Plat. *Leg.* 967 d; Aristot. *de phil. fr.* 18 n. 1 Walzer.

52 *cons.* 4, 6, 54; Ammon. *apud Zach.* PG 85, 1029 b ὅπερ διανοεῖσθαι περὶ τοῦ πρώτου ἐκείνου οὕθ' ὄλωσθαι θέμις.

Often when a Greek argument advances there is a moment of careful reflection about the worthiness of the language used. This happens repeatedly in Boethius: “if we are to give names to things worthily . . .” “No statement could be more worthy of God” (*deo dignius*)<sup>53</sup>, a phrase which in fact literally translates the Greek philosophic term θεοπρεπές. At the very end of this *prosa* Boethius carefully recalls Plato’s demand that “words should be cognate” (συγγενεῖς; Boethius: *cognatos*) with the objects they describe”.<sup>54</sup>

Eke Plato seith whoso that can him rede

The wordes mote be cosin to the dede. (Chaucer, prologue 741)

Words about God must themselves have a certain divine character. In the next book, repeating the ineffably sublime theme that order encompasses all, Boethius duly exalts his tone with a ‘scripture’ from Homer: “It is hard for me to explain all this as if I were a god” (cons. 4, 6, 53 = Il. 12, 176). Also: “It is not fitting (*fas*: Greek θέμις) for man either to think in his mind or express in his words the divine handiwork” (cons. 4, 6, 54) – an echo of the passage in the *Timaeus* which says that it is well nigh impossible to find the creator, or having found him to describe him.<sup>55</sup>

The real scripture which surfaces in the Boethian *prosa* is not the Bible but an oracular verse from the Eleatic Parmenides, devoutly cited in the original Greek, comparing ultimate reality to a sphere, a geometric shape which is beautifully unitary and self-contained. The sphere as image of the divine unity and self-consistency recurs frequently in the Greek philosophic literature. It is found not only in the Eleatics but in Plato, and Aristotle, and even in the more materialist theologians such as Diogenes of Apollonia.<sup>56</sup> In the early dialogues of Aristotle the envelope of “fifth element” which encloses the universe is spherical: that element is called ‘divine’ and is the stuff that comprises the heavenly bodies and also human souls in their most elevated feature, rational thought, which itself is regarded as having a sort of spherical character.<sup>57</sup>

So when Boethius replies that he rejoices in the lady’s choice of language I do not think it is because she has suddenly become biblical and out of character, but rather because her idiom is now more memorably Hellenic and philosophic, because it is Platonically θεοπρεπές, endowed with the true μουσική, following at once the “muse of Plato” and the Eleatic poets. Boethius’ language has every reason to be described as “nourished by both Eleatic and

53 cons. 3, 10, 21 *nihil . . . deo dignius*; Xenophanes VS 21 B 1, 13.

54 cons. 3, 12, 38 *cognatos de quibus loquuntur rebus oportere esse sermones*; Plat. Tim. 29 b 4.

55 cons. *ibid.*; Pl. Tim. 28 c; Plot. 6, 8, 18.

56 Parmenides VS 28 B 43; Diog. Apoll. (Diog. Laert. 9, 57); Plat. Sophist. 244 d; rep. 616–617; Epin. 898 c.

57 cons. 3, 11, 30; Parmenides VS 28 B 1, 29; B 5; Plat. Tim. 47 b–d.

Platonic studies”.<sup>58</sup> One need not go on unduly about this Greek theme of linguistic propriety for it has already been amply illustrated in the masterly writings of Werner Jaeger.

Reverence implies attention to stylistically persuasive presentation of the argument that divine action is Mind, and Mind is self-sufficient and effortless in its providential creativity. Lady Philosophy’s words to this effect are “according to the muse”, poetic, hymnodic, and therefore in accord with the Eleatic school which “taught through poetry”. In the fragments which survive of that poetry we find Xenophanes in one memorable line uttering the whole gist of the Boethian doctrine of a supreme Being, a supreme Good, that sweetly, without labour, sways the entire universe by sheer mental omnipotence: “but without labour vibrates all things by the power of thought”.<sup>59</sup>

(VI) The ethic of the Boethian argument is a Greek ethic of optimism, the traditional eudaemonistic ethic in which the supremely good is shown to be the supremely happy, for no greater happiness can be imagined. Goodness, happiness, power are in effect made synonymous. So a man becomes good and happy at the same time.<sup>60</sup> That in fact is how he becomes like to God. The ideal suggested to the Greeks by a theology of divine power was ‘assimilation’ (ὁμοίωσις) to God, ‘imitation’ of God, “‘following’ of God. Lady Philosophy herself displays this assimilation: at one point (3 carm. 9, 28) God is poetically imagined as “leader, path, vehicle”, and at another (4, 1, 9) Philosophy uses the same description for herself, “my leadership, my path, my vehicles”. And she claims that the success of her arguments is God’s work, *ipso auctore*. In so far as humans are endowed with a share in the divine Nous their effort must be to live according to it, identify with it. They have to live, albeit spasmodically, that noetic life which is eternity, and thus, “as far as may be, immortalise themselves”, become ‘gods’.<sup>61</sup> They have to attempt the miracle of getting outside time. They have to pass through the zero point where the extended gives place to the unextended – where physical joy or treasured belongings or social esteem no longer apply. That human effort to ‘eternalize’, in which the whole material universe concurs, is the very essence of Platonic morality, and it leaves its mark on the Aristotelian tradition.

The philosophic way of life would aim at reaching a divinely timeless instant where all experience would interpenetrate and coalesce instead of arriving in

58 cons. 1, 1, 10 *Eleaticis atque Academicis studiis innutritum*.

59 Xenophanes VS 21 B 25 (cf. II. 9, 600).

60 cons. 4, 2, 12 *omnes igitur homines boni pariter ac mali indiscreta intentione ad bonum pervenire nituntur?* Aristot. frg. p. 146 Ross.

61 cons. 1, 4, 39; Aristot. EN 1177 b 33 εἰ δὲ θεῖον ὁ νοῦς πρὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον, καὶ ὁ κατὰ τοῦτον βίος θεῖος πρὸς τὸν ἀνθρώπινον βίον. χρῆ ... ἐφ’ ὅσον ἐνδέχεται ἀθανατίζειν.

sequence one occasion at a time. The central instant would be all at once a total memory, a conscious life immediately complete, a moment in which vision of the good would banish the shadow of evil. It would not be a congeries of temporal memories such as make up our ordinary experience, because that is spatial and time-bound. And yet the unmoving centre would be a spring of creativity. The quiet *instantia* would be a creative balance of forces, the eye of the storm, a Heraclitean rest amid dynamic tension, like the surface calm of a strongly flowing river:

At the still point of the turning world

... at the still point there the dance is. (Eliot, *Burnt Norton*)

That instant of divine ‘leisure’ which is eternity suggested to Plotinus and his school an ethic of calm. The philosopher intent on eternity will not even experience what later religious writers call “interior combat”. So long as the divine Reason is present to him he can relax in its comforting presence. The essential human task then is to remove obstacles to the gentle irradiation of that supreme source of goodness and beauty. Humans have to try and banish even the ‘Forms’ of the divine Mind “so that the ultimate Good may manifest its presence”. Beauty of Form is inert unless that “light of the Good” shines upon it as a ‘grace’ (χάρις) from the transcendent One.<sup>62</sup> This language was to leave its mark on Christian idiom. Implicit in the Plotinian context is the ethic of ‘vision’, the conversion of the “eye of the soul”<sup>63</sup> from the shadows of opinion and imagination to the light of Nous, as prescribed so dramatically in Plato’s similitude of the prisoners in the cave. The darkened mind has to be trained to identify with the light, to become mentally sun-like, so as to achieve vision of the highest good. The mathematical disciplines, though the unlearned may regard them as sacrilegious,<sup>64</sup> are a training (ἐπιναγωγὴ) to this end, with their emphasis on general abstractions, on genera and species, which are the exemplaria of the divine mind and of all nature. But beyond the disciplines is the ulterior aim of union with Nous, thus sharing in that all-simple, all-calm, divine awareness which is eternity. Man has thus, as far as he can, to “make himself eternal”, attempting the “following of God”, the “likening to God”,<sup>65</sup> even though that implies a superhuman simplicity. The Plotinian ethic is admirably summed up in Pierre Hadot’s phrase, “la simplicité du regard”.

In that ultimate intuition a person reaches final calm through stilling of the irrational turbulence in the soul. Such inner quiet, imitating the divine effortlessness, is not so much an activity as an all-simple inner disposition of soul.

62 cons. 4, 2, 12 *omnes igitur homines boni pariter ac mali indiscreta intentione ad bonum pervenire nituntur?* Aristot. frg. p. 146 Ross.

63 Plat. rep. 519 b 3, 527 e 5, 533 d 2.

64 cons. 1, 4, 41; Plat. Leg. 821 a; Epin. 977 b.

65 cons. 1, 4, 38; 3 carm. 9, 21; 4 carm. 1, 23; Plat. rep. 500 b; M. Ant. 5, 27; Plot. 6, 4, 14, 16.

It assumes man into a state of being that is prior to and outside of time, and therefore outside of death. Yet it will have control of all outgoing action, all dealings with the physical self, or with the world, or with society.

The moment of quiet comes by a certain release from discursive reasoning, so that the ‘mirror’ at the depth of personality may be undisturbed in its reflecting of the supreme,<sup>66</sup> in its becoming “all one” with the divine simplicity present by silence. To achieve this “repose in the divine”<sup>67</sup> all distraction must be shut out, as when listening for a friend’s voice amid a crowded babble. The philosopher ever seeks the quiet centre, for truth too has a “motionless heart”.

Within this Greek moral tradition there recurs the Eleatic image of the sphere, symbol of the divine self-coherence. Plotinus phrases it thus: “As in a material mass so in the soul there must be a centre, that around which the object, soul or material mass, revolves. The soul exists in revolution around God to whom it clings in love, holding itself to the utmost of its power near to him as the Being on which all depends; and since it cannot coincide with God it circles about him”. For mere humans, of course, encumbered with material extension, the effort can never be a total success. There is never perfection of mimetic vision. But the desire to achieve it, the desire located “in between” (μεταξύ) penury and plenty, body and non-body, extension and non-extension, constitutes the reverent ‘commerce’ of prayer, “interpreting and ferrying”, which is yet not an outward ritual or sound but a quiet inner ‘stretching’, a constant turning back to the divine.<sup>68</sup> At the very least the soul can be brought to share in the eternal quality which resides in its own highest objects of contemplation, for the soul actually becomes what it sees: its faculty changes according to the object of its awareness: “The soul when it is turned towards those higher things which are of their essence true and eternal sets up a special faculty called *mens*: if trained on to lower objects it becomes *opinio* or *phantasia*”.<sup>69</sup>

There is an aesthetic turn to this ethic, for the Platonic good is also the beautiful. A truly philosophic style can never descend into crude mythology. Rather, the reverent philosopher in his mimesis of the divine must stylistically argue from a self-contained centre, “from within the subject”. The circumference of thought and word is to be controlled by that centre. It is from the central quiet deep within the soul, achieved by anamnesis, that all creative work will begin. Inner vision, if intense enough, if vivid enough, if it carries “the whole soul with it” (Plat. rep. 518 c), will issue in truly creative physical

66 Plat. Tim. 71 b; Phaedr. 255 d; cf. cons. 2, 6, 7.

67 cons. 3 m. 9, 27; Aristot. EN 1177 b 4 δοκεῖ τε ἡ εὐδαιμονία ἐν τῇ σχολῇ εἶναι. Plot. 4, 8, 1, 1; Parmenides. VS 28 B 2.

68 cons. 3, 12, 37; Parm. VS 28 B 8, 43; Xenophanes VS 21 B 21; Plat. Sophist. 244 e; Epin. 898 c; Plot. 1, 7, 1, 17; Simp. in phys. 112, 4; Plot. 2, 2, 2, 12 tr. MacKenna; cf. Plot. 6, 9, 8, 1 ff.; 5, 1, 6, 8.

69 Boeth. schol. in anal. pr. 42 b 24 Minio-Paluello; Plot. 4, 3, 8, 15.

activity.<sup>70</sup> Platonists imagined the universe as an artefact, albeit an alive artefact, and described it on the analogy of artistic creation, of inner visualisation where perfection of vision precludes defect of product, and it is the artist's inner quiet which sets up the vision:

Like a long-legged fly upon the stream

His mind moves upon silence. (Yeats, Long-legged Fly)

The soul's imitation of the divine 'leisure' (σχολή, cf. n. 67), its "revolving round the divine consciousness", is therefore a kind of repose awaiting vision, a μονή, an interior creative silence.

The school philosophy as Boethius knew it from his Greek sources was divided into practical and speculative, and speculative was divided into physical, mathematical and ontological (or metaphysical). This last and most sublime section was also called θεολογία, a term much favoured by Proclus who knew its Platonic resonance. Its devotee, the θεολόγος, aspirant to the visionary consciousness of 'light', reappears in Latin as Boethius' *divini speculator*. Not much has come down about the school content of this department of study, but there survives a Greek note in a Paris manuscript which is informative:

"The task of the θεολόγος is to discover and prove that there is *Providence*, and that it is Incorporeal, and that it is *Effortless*, and that it provides for things here, and that it exercises incorrupt *Judgment*. The θεολόγος should also know how the divine *Will* (βούλησις) differs from planned *Choice* (προαίρεσις)."<sup>71</sup>

All these topics are in fact treated by Boethius. Indeed there is a similarly scholastic list in the Consolation, introducing the book's final batch of arguments: the simplicity (eternity) of Providence vis-à-vis the sudden happenings of chance and the series of fate; the Providential awareness in its relation to temporal events; freedom of choice. These lists of "customary questions" in the philosophic schools are at the heart of ancient Platonic theology, and justify the description by Cassiodorus of one Greek source of Boethian translation as *Plato theologus* (Cassiod. var. 1, 45, 4).

The theology of vision may well puzzle a modern reader. The ultimate One has no parts and is therefore indivisible, indissoluble, unconquerable. It is difficult to imagine how a mere human could ever coincide with such intangible omnipotence. It is unwelcome gospel for those who admire the diversity and

70 cons. 3, 2, 38 *rationes . . . non extra petitas sed intra rei quam tractabamus ambitum collocatas*; 3 carm. 11, 5f. *quicquid extra molitur suis retrusum possidere thesauris*, 11 *haeret profecto semen introrsum veri*; Plot. 1, 6, 8, 2 οἶον ἔνδον ἐν ἁγίοις ἱεροῖς μένον, Plat. rep. 518 c.

71 cons. 5, 6, 25; Plat. Epist. 7, 341 d; cons. 4, 6, 4; ms. Par. gr. 1973 (Ammon. in Porphy. p. xlvi Busse) τοῦ θεολόγου οὖν ἔργον τὰ τοιαῦτα ζητεῖν καὶ δεῖξαι· ὧς ἐστὶ πρόνοια καὶ ἀσώματός ἐστι καὶ ἄπονος· καὶ προνοεῖται τῶν τῆδε· καὶ ἀδέκαστον ποιεῖται τὴν κρίσιν· καὶ ἔτι γε γινώσκειν δεῖ τὸν θεολόγον τί διαφέρει βούλησις προαιρέσεως.



changeability of nature. Yet it is not easy to dismiss. In looking back over the long course of his *History of Philosophy* F.C. Copleston observes that though no cumulative pattern or progress appears there as in the history of science there yet seems to recur an oscillation between the empiricist urge towards pluralism and the Platonic urge towards transcendental unity.

(VII) Though there is a world of difference between the Jewish concept of Wisdom (hokmah) and the *summum bonum* of the philosophers this small verbal parallel in Boethius is striking, and those readers who make so much of it might indeed have strengthened their case by noting that the previous verse in *Wisdom*, ending Book vii, actually mentions, just like the previous sentence here in Boethius, the divinity's quiet suppression of recalcitrant evil. Theiler hesitantly suggested that *Wisdom* might have been known to some of the Alexandrian masters.<sup>72</sup> But I would prefer to suggest that the transmission actually runs in the opposite direction. This is not the only place in *Wisdom* where phrases from Greek philosophy colour the biblical idiom: for the book was deuterocanonical and its composition subject to Hellenistic influence. A few instances may be recalled: the four cardinal virtues (8, 7); emanation (7, 25); pre-existent 'formless' matter (11, 17); a suggestion of the pre-existence of soul (8, 19) and of allocation of souls by lot (8, 19). These notions are to be found in Plato's *Republic*, to go no further, and they recur in the voluminous literature of the later Greek schools. Similarly Boethius' dramatic final words *cuncta cernentis* which really refer back to the all-seeing Providence previously described, the "true sun" that is superior to Homer's Phoebus, are echoed in a deuterocanonical Greek addition to *Esther* (8, 12).<sup>73</sup> Such literary influences passed from Greek philosophy to the Jewish book, *Wisdom*, not the other way, and it should also be stressed that they are incidental to the main drift of that book, which is just as distinctively Jewish and biblical as the Boethian work is Hellenic and philosophical in its sequence of *sententiae* and songs (cons. 3, 1, 2).

Arguments for other Christian analogies in the *Consolatio* seem equally weak. The Boethian word *commercium* describing prayer has been noted as occurring in the Christian liturgy, and supposedly borrowed from there. But it would be much more ad rem to adduce Plato's description of prayer as a commerce (ἐμπορικὴ), and as spiritual intertrading between human poverty and divine plenty.<sup>74</sup> Given the rich influence of Plato on the Greek Church Fathers

72 Cf. Gruber ad cons. 3, 12.

73 cons. 5 carm. 2, 7; 5 carm. 4, 17; 5, 6, 48; Il. 3, 277; Od. 12, 323; Aesch. Prom. 9; Plat. rep. 508; LXX Es. 8, 12 d.

74 cons. 5, 3, 34 *unicum illud inter homines deumque commercium, sperandi scilicet ac deprecandi . . . qui solus modus est quo cum deo colloqui homines posse videantur illique inaccessae luci . . . coniungi*; Plat. Euthphr. 14 e; Symp. 202 e f. πᾶν τὸ δαμόνιον μεταξὺ ἐστὶ θεοῦ τε καὶ θνητοῦ . . . ἐρμηνεῦον καὶ διαπορθμεῦον

it is hardly surprising if an occasional Platonic phrase surfaces in the Christian liturgies. One has to be equally sceptical about Augustinian ‘sources’. The few passages adduced to prove Consolation a ‘sequel’ to Augustine’s Soliloquia are all in fact Neoplatonic commonplaces which can be found easily in the extant Greek Platonists. The dependence of Augustine on Latin versions of Greek philosophic texts has been convincingly researched by J. J. O’Meara. Only if portions of Augustine’s Latin wording were reproduced unmistakably by Boethius could one be sure of direct dependence, and that is far from being so. Other Augustinian parallels are listed in Bieler’s edition, but not one is verbally close enough to establish direct dependence. It is not a case of Boethius being a sequel to Augustine, but of both being sequel to the Greek *libri Platoniorum*.

To round off. Professor Gruber’s reticence seems to me judicious. The Boethian sentence, taken as a whole, is not fully aligned to the Biblical one. Only a minor phrase of it is. It would be unwise to build an intellectual history of Boethius on that phrase alone without examining the general context and tone of the argument in which it inheres. The argument, as we have seen, turns around the notion of an omnipotent unity-goodness-happiness which quietly overpowers evil. This omnipotence is the concentrated dynamism of a consciousness that is so simple, so unmixed, and so total, that it suffers no restriction, no need of externals, no quantitative features spatial or temporal to mar its simple unison or its undisturbed happiness: so it ‘overflows’, ‘radiates’, ‘recoils’, ‘relaxes’ creatively with an easy generosity. And that concept of divine dynamism is richly documented in the Greek philosophic tradition. So is the emphasis on the divine effortlessness. And as for the particular felicity of philosophical language applauded by Boethius, that only echoes the demand of those Greek philosophers, Eleatic and Platonist, who on such solemn themes called for philosophic ‘dignity’ of idiom. The Boethian solemnity is simply a legacy from the didactic manner of Eleatic philosophy, here transmitted by Neoplatonist scholastics. The words admired by Boethius do indeed exude an incantatory ethic, and their *μουσική* is far from being merely verbal; they carry the inner appeal of an age-old *philosophia perennis*.

A footnote.

That theme of the all-powerful but still centre sweetly disposing the outer turbulence has exercised a long and pervasive influence. For it is a theme that has its base in mystic experience, and the experience has extended far beyond the bookish field of Greek philosophy. It is still found for instance in the poetry of nature mysticism:

... and along with the flow of wind the flow of water in the beck, swollen  
with all the rivulets of the fells, pouring itself towards the lake, ...

θεοῖς τὰ παρ’ ἀνθρώπων καὶ ἀνθρώποις τὰ παρὰ θεῶν ... διὰ τούτου πᾶσά ἐστιν ἡ  
ὁμιλία καὶ διάλεκτος θεοῖς πρὸς ἀνθρώπους. Plot. 1, 6, 9, 7.

a realisation of the Tao, one might say, of the power of the elements finding their way not by effort but by effortlessness.

(Kathleen Raine, *The Land Unknown*, 121)

The mystic prays for a spirit within the self that will “silently sound”. “Sit ye stone still at the feet of God and listen to him alone” (*Ancrene Riwe*). It is to Aristotle’s credit that he was aware of this mystic urge and, in Jaeger’s words, “recognized that inner composure is the essence of all religious devotion” (*Aristoteles*. Engl. trans. Robinson, 160). In part Aristotle owed this insight to his master Plato, who in turn owed it to his great Eleatic predecessor Xenophanes. The Eleatic thinkers in envisaging being as a still-centred sphere were no doubt inheriting Pythagorean preoccupations. They transmuted the earlier conception and gave it permanently to the Platonic and Aristotelian schools, and so the imagery they used recurs long afterwards in the European tradition. A medieval recluse, quietly anonymous save for the titular of her church, St Julian’s at Norwich, reaches, with the same Platonic “mind’s eye” of pure thought, the ancient vision of the sphere. But hers is an even more poetic idiom than that of the versifying Eleatics, a more light-hearted inspiration than “the muse of Plato”, because she has a less abstract, more anthropomorphic, more truly biblical, image of the omnipotent goodness that sweetly orders the universe, τὰ πάντα:

He showed me a little thing, the size of a hazel-nut, in the palm of my hand, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with my mind’s eye and I thought, “what can this be?” And answer came, “It is all that is made” .

She also indeed voices, probably less from literary instruction in the tradition than from her own mystic instinct, the old Eleatic paradox that the inner core of stillness deploys the entire omnipotence of cosmic energy:

God is the still point at the centre. There is no doer but he.

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