

IV Ciclo di Studi Medievali

Atti del Convegno

4-5 giugno 2018

Firenze



NUME
GRUPPO DI RICERCA
SUL MEDIOEVO LATINO

Prima Edizione 2018

Edizioni EBS Print

ISBN 978-88-9349-371-0



Copyright © 2018 NUME – NUOVO MEDIOEVO

Finito di stampare nel mese di Maggio 2018

presso Etabeta-ps in Arcore (MB)

È vietata la produzione, totale o parziale, con qualsiasi mezzo
e per qualsiasi utilizzo, anche ad uso didattico, se non autorizzata
in forma scritta dal Curatore.

«We become what we remember»: memory and recollection in the Old English *Boethius*

Rūta Zukienė

The question addressed in the present paper (the treatment of human memory and recollection in the Old English Boethius) exemplifies the demanding philosophical load encountered by the Anglo-Saxon translator in an unprecedented attempt to render and thus to respond to one of the finest works of late antiquity, Boethius' De consolazione philosophiae. The Old English passages on memory investigated in terms of their immediate context and the underlying philosophical substratum reveal a number of philosophemes distinctly Neoplatonic in their origin. First, in the Old English Boethius, memory is based in the undisturbed part of the human mind, the idea akin to the Neoplatonic teaching of the compositional nature of the human soul, the highest level of which is impassible to the perturbations of the sensible world. Furthermore, following Plato's teaching on recollection, memory in Alfred's text is conceived of as a place wherein turns the human mind to discover wisdom and right understanding. While in Boethius the recollection of eternal principles determines the human ascent to the divine (a concept that originates in Plotinus' teaching on the remembering soul's identity with the object of its attention) in the Old English text, the late antique concept of memoria is rendered in Augustinian and Eriugenan terms as a way of human reditus to God and the dwelling place of Christ. Finally, a peculiar description of the divine nature in the final chapter of the Old English Boethius excludes memory from God's attributes, which once again testifies to the underlying proximity of Neoplatonic thought that emphasized memory's dependence on the perception of time and excluded it from the thinking mind of eternal beings.

Introduction

In ninth-century England, King Alfred's translation of Boethius' *De consolazione philosophiae* (DCP) was an unprecedented attempt to render one of the finest works of late antiquity into a vernacular tongue. A work profoundly Neoplatonic in character, the DCP is loaded with numerous allusions to Classical and late antique thought, which were no easy task for the vernacular translator. In addition, the Boethius that reached Alfred's England was a text surrounded by Carolingian glosses and commentaries compiled from a variety of sources.¹ Understanding the complex historical, textual and philosophical background of Alfred's translation encourages us to study the work qua rare witness to the ninth-century speculative thought in a vernacular tongue.

The present study addresses the representation of human memory in the Old English *Boethius* (OEBo) and considers some of the Neoplatonic doctrines that underlie Alfredian passages. What is important to understand with regard to traces of Neoplatonism in the ninth-century Alfredian translations is that ancient philosophical doctrines in these texts do not appear in a pure and pristine state, but rather resurge as elements of new forms and accretions, sometimes in strikingly familiar formulations, yet oftentimes reclaimed and veiled under different forms of expression and interpretation. Methodologically, therefore, it is helpful to apply the concept of *philosopheme* that in words of Stephen Gersh is «a kind of philosophical nucleus», a «minimal unit of philosophical discourse» that authors employ in their texts. In contrast to the transmission of full-fledged doctrines, philosophemes may be used unconsciously, to «appear (and disappear) or be emphasized (and de-emphasized) as the author weaves his discourse in crossing the boundaries between logical argument and semantic association».² In the case of OEBo, close reading reveals a number of “philosophical nuclei” that own their origins to distinctly Neoplatonic doctrines. Many of them can be directly attributed to the Neoplatonic mindset of the original text; however, some inherently Neoplatonic elements occur in vernacular passages that have no immediate support in the DCP. It is very likely that these

interpolations originate from the ancillary material used by the translator and testify to the scope of Neoplatonic influence in medieval thought.

In what follows, I will present three OE passages on memory, closely investigate their immediate context and discuss the philosophical background for the account of memory presented. The first passage will lead to the problem of soul's impassibility, an ancient debate between Aristotle and Plotinus on the question of how memories are formed and retained in the human soul. The second passage will illustrate how the Platonic concept of learning as recollection was rethought in the Christian Neoplatonic tradition. Finally, memory's dependence on time will exclude it from divine attributes in an apophatic description of God's nature in OEBo. The latter case also exemplifies the way the Neoplatonic doctrine of the unknowability of God was incorporated in the teachings of Christian negative theology.

OEBo 5.68-70: The impassible nature of the human soul

The core argument of the DCP rests on the idea of God as the *summum bonum* ("the highest good") that guides and governs the universe, and whose Providence decrees all human fortunes and misfortunes. Boethius the prisoner is urged by Lady Philosophy to remember God's singularity and stability that exist beyond the commotions of the sensible world. Memory and reminiscence in this way are fundamental for the human mind to reorient and align itself with the governing principle of the universe.

The premise for the philosopher's return to memory to find there the knowledge of eternal principles is the Neoplatonic teaching of the impassible nature of the human soul amplified by Plotinus' theory of its undescended part. Although the soul is understood as the entity mediating between the sensible and the intelligible reality, in Plotinus, its highest part «is eternally in contact with the Intelligible world».³ In the following extract from OEBo, Wisdom remarks on the Mind's⁴ forgetfulness caused by sorrow:

*Hu mæg þæt beon nu þu þæt angin wast þæt ðu eac þone ende nyte? Forþam seo gedrefednes mæg þæt mod onstyrian ac heo hit ne mæg his gewittes bereafien.*⁵

How can it be that, now that you know the beginning, you do not also know the end? For affliction can disturb the mind but it cannot deprive it of its intelligence.⁶

The Latin original does contain the idea of anxiety and perturbation,⁷ yet it is silent about different faculties of the soul, designated in OE by the terms *mod* and *gewitt*. The meaning of *mod* in OEBo is at least twofold: either it means human mind in general as opposed to body,⁸ or it means the lower part of the cognitive faculty that is susceptible to commotions.⁹ *Gewitt*, in contrast, is used for the undisturbed mind of God, still and stable,¹⁰ also, for the portions of intelligence distributed downwards the scale of cognition: from God to angels, humans, and finally to moving and unmoving animals.¹¹ *Gewitt* is also the part of human mind sought by Wisdom and equivalent to the Latin *sedes mentis*.¹² The fact that Wisdom requires to remember *finis rerum* despite the grief that has obscured Mind's memory means that some essential memories are contained in the undisturbed *gewitt*. This view in Alfred's translation is later supported by Wisdom's remark that despite the great misfortune (the unjust imprisonment), it did not wholly forsake Mind's intelligence (again *gewitt*).¹³

The Neoplatonic background for the idea that memory rests in the undisturbed part of the soul lies in Plotinus' teaching about sense perception and the implications of this teaching for his theory of human memory. Considering sense perception, Plotinus' fundamental tenet is that change and disturbance operate in the animated body, but do not touch the soul itself. In his treatise on impassibility (*Ennead* III.6), Plotinus confronts Stoic charges that if the soul receives imprints from sense perception, it suffers change, and thus, cannot be immortal.¹⁴ To

secure the soul's immortality, Plotinus distances himself from the Aristotelian theory of sense perception, which imparts the soul with physical imprints similar to stamps on wax, and carefully separates the activities of the soul (thought, memory, contemplation) from those of the animated body (pleasure, pain, anger, appetite). In his treatise *On Sense-Perception and Memory* (*Ennead* IV.6), Plotinus argues that the soul actively observes the impressions received in the animated body, but never passively receives any impressions itself.¹⁵

Plotinus' theory that the soul experiences no change in sense perception has important implications on his theory of memory. In the case of memory, Plotinus is careful to retain a similar distinction between the soul and the sense-perceptions remembered: although the soul can come to their nearness, its role is again pure activity: the projection of light onto the things presented, which makes them visible.¹⁶ The memory of Intellectual things, in contrast, is based on soul's essential kinship, even identity with the intelligible realm; therefore, Plotinus speaks of the soul approaching the intelligibles intuitively, with its knowledge attained «because it has them in some way».¹⁷

As Boethius repeatedly alludes to the soul's awakening to its true self and the eternal knowledge within, the ideas of undisturbed mind's vision, the alien commotion of the sensible world, the opposition of mind's light vs the darkness of oblivion are all faithfully rendered into Old English.¹⁸ The impassible part of the soul, called *inneward mod* "inner mind" and *ingepanc* "inner thought"¹⁹ is said to withstand the heaviness of body and vices (which echoes the Plotinian soul's descent into body and the resulting error) and preserve the right understanding (*rihtwisnesse*) within human memory.

OEBo 12.14-18: «We become what we remember»

DCP III.m.11 is a poetic summary of the Platonic doctrine of recollection, originally attributed to Socrates as an argument for soul's immortality²⁰ and clad in a densely metaphorical language of Neoplatonic origin.²¹ The concluding lines explicitly attribute the teaching to Plato, which is readily accepted by the OE translator. The underlying structure of Boethius' thought is quite faithfully rendered as well:

*Forþam hit is swiðe ryht spell þæt Plato se uðwita sæde. He cwæð swa hwa swa ungenyrdig sie rihtwisnesse, gecerre hine to his gemynde. Ðonne fint he þær þa ryhtwisnesse gebyde mid þæs licþoman befignesse and mid his modes gedrefednesse and bisgunga.*²²

For it is a very just speech that Plato the philosopher said. He said, whoever is forgetful of right understanding, let him turn back to his memory. Then he will find there the right understanding hidden by the body's heaviness and by mind's disturbance and pre-occupations.²³

OE *ryhtwisnesse* "right understanding" is a close interpretation of Boethius' phrase *recta censetis* "(you) rightly suppose, judge" (III.m.11.13);²⁴ the body's heaviness parallels Latin *obliviosam corpus invehens molem* "the body bringing in the mass that causes forgetfulness" (III.m.11.10), whereas the turning back to one's memory mirrors Boethian *in se revolvat* (III.m.11.3) and *recordatur* "recollect" (III.m.11.16).

The turning-back movement aptly rendered in OE with the perfective verb *gecerre*²⁵ in the Neoplatonic thought constitutes part of the overall structure of reality that involves abiding in, procession from and reversion upon one's cause.²⁶ Plotinus describes all things emanating from the One, outpouring and overflowing like a stream from the One's superabundance,²⁷ radiating out into the darkness like circles of light from the centre light.²⁸ Yet to stay illuminated, to receive their form and order, all beings must return to their source. In the case of souls, the principle of reversion coincides with soul's reversion to itself: turning within, the soul turns to its cause and comes into contemplation of the One.²⁹

Memory in Plotinus is a type of contemplation that involves recollection of objects once perceived.³⁰ The soul acquires memory when it descends from the intelligible realm; then, being at «the frontier between two worlds», the intelligible and the sensible, it can move in both directions and through its attention to different realms become what it remembers.³¹ In the Christian tradition, the soul's return was interpreted as human desire to become one with Christ, identified as Wisdom itself: «for Eriugena as for Augustine and Dionysius, Christ is wisdom, . . . the *thesaurus scientiae et sapientiae*».³² The following extract from OEBo adheres to this way of interpretation:

*[S]e þe wille habban þa ecan gesælða, he sceal fleon þone frencan wlite þises middaneardes and timbrian þæt bus his modes on þam feastan stane eadmetta, forþam þe Crist eardað on þære dene eadmodnesse and on þam gemynde wisdomes.*³³

[H]e who wishes to have the eternal felicity must flee the dangerous beauty of this world and build the house of his mind on the firm rock of humility, for Christ lives in the valley of humility and in the memorial of wisdom.³⁴

The translator freely interprets the original lines (DCP II.m.IV.13-16) and resorts to allegorical explanation of nearly every image in the hymn, drawing on the resources of medieval glossators of the DCP.³⁵ The appended remark about memory as the dwelling place of Christ deserves closer consideration, as it testifies to the underlying proximity of Neoplatonic influence. While Christ's humility refers to His incarnation,³⁶ hence God's condescension, the second part dialectically counterweighs it with human turning to memory, which leads to wisdom, who is Christ himself. The importance of the soul's disposition towards the object of its recollection and its consequential susceptibility to the object's influence to become what it remembers were recognised in Plotinus; here, in the Christian tradition, memory is again thought of as a way of human *reditus* to God.

OEBo 42.23-30: Memory and time

The last extract links memory to time and occurs in a peculiar description of God's nature in terms of both positive and negative theology. The immediate context is Boethius' discussion of the differences between the perpetuity of the world and God's eternity: while the perpetual has no beginning nor end, it still cannot encompass its own progression in time; in contrast, God's eternity is the whole, perfect and simultaneous possession of the endless life.³⁷ Alfred responds with a contrast between human beings and God, and further elaborates on the divine attributes in apophatic terms:

*Forþon we witon swiðe lytel þas þe ær us wæs buton þe gemynde and þe geærscunge . . . Ac him is eall andweard, ge þætte ær wæs ge þætte nu is ge þætte æfter us bið; eall hit is him andweard. . . Ne ofman he næfre nanwubt forþam næfre nauht he forgeat. Ne secd he nanwubt ne ne smeað forþam he hit wat eall.*³⁸

Because we know very little of what was before us except by memory and by inquiry . . . But for him everything is present, both that which was before and that which now is and that which will be after us; it is all present to him. . . He never remembers anything because he never forgot anything. He seeks nothing nor ponders, for he knows it all.³⁹

The link between time and memory was established early on by Aristotle, who maintained that memory relates to the past perceptions and thoughts viewed in the mind of the remembering person and can be attributed only to animals who perceive time.⁴⁰ Discussing what has the natural capacity of remembering, Plotinus likewise excludes the experience of time and hence all memory from the divine beings' thinking: «We must certainly not attribute memory of God, or real being or Intellect; for nothing [external] comes to them and there is

no time, but eternity in which real being is, and there is neither before nor after, but it is always as it is, in the same state not admitting of any change».⁴¹ At the beginning of Book 11 of the *Confessiones*, Augustine is bemused by God's eternity and the implications it might have for His knowledge of the past: «Since you are outside time in eternity, are you unaware of the things I tell you?»⁴² As John M. Rist puts it, Augustine's past was experienced through senses and committed to memory, «[b]ut God has no senses and might be supposed only to have knowledge of the eternal and unchanging».⁴³ The ultimate unknowability and ineffability of God's nature were even more systematically approached by Eriugena, whose powerful synthesis of Greek and Latin sources might have had its impact on Alfredian translations as well. A thorough analysis of Alfred's treatment of God's nature is yet to be carried out; for now one might notice the remarkable incorporation of the aphoretic method (Gk. *aphraisisis* 'abstraction, denial') of negative theologians to speak not only about God's memory, but also about His might, wisdom and self-sufficiency. As the description moves forward, more and more of God's nature is predicated positively, but this, according to Deirdre Carabine, is only to be expected from a Christian author, for «[n]o Christian philosopher or theologian ends theology in absolute negation, for negation is undertaken, as Meister Eckhart says, in order to affirm the truest sense possible».⁴⁴

To conclude, the three passages discussed indicate that Alfred's representation of memory contains significant elements of Neoplatonic provenance, the philosophical substratum that binds into a coherent framework what otherwise might appear separate individual extracts on memory. Prominent in Alfred's treatment are the philosophemes of the impassible nature of the compositional soul, the soul's *reditus* to its source, and memory understood as the locus of divine principles in man. In confluence with the Christian tradition, the latter philosopheme undergoes significant transformation, and memory becomes depicted as the dwelling place of Christ; however, with regard to the eternal mind's thinking, recollection is still excluded from it on the grounds of memory's essential dependence on the perception of time.

1. M. Godden, S. Irvine (eds.), *The Old English Boethius: An Edition of the Old English Versions of Boethius's "De Consolatione Philosophiae,"* Oxford, 2009, vol. 1, pp. 5-8; R. Love, *The Latin Commentaries on Boethius's De Consolatione Philosophiae from the 9th to the 11th Centuries*, in P. Phillips, N.H. Kaylor (eds.), *A Companion to Boethius in the Middle Ages*, Leiden 2012, pp. 75-133.

2. S. Gersh, *The First Principles of Latin Neoplatonism: Augustine, Macrobius, Boethius*, in «Vivarium», vol. 50, n. 2, 2012, pp. 113-138, at p. 116.

3. J.M. Rist, *Integration and the Undescended Soul in Plotinus*, in «The American Journal of Philology», vol. 88, n. 4, 1967, pp. 410-422, at p. 422.

4. In contrast to Lady Philosophy and the prisoner Boethius in the Latin text, OEBo features Wisdom, sometimes called (*Ge*)*sceadwisnes* 'intelligence', conversing with the figure of Mind.

5. OEBo 5.68-70. I quote OEBo from M. Godden, *The Old English Boethius* cit., pp.240-382.

6. M. Godden, *ivi*, 8.

7. DCP I.pr.6.30-32: *Verum hi perturbationum mores, ea valentia est, ut mouere quidem loco hominem possint, conuellere autem sibi que totum exstirpare non possint.* I quote the DCP from Boethius, *The Theological Tractates. The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H.F. Stewart et al., Cambridge 1973.

8. Cfr. OEBo 41.170-171 and the complex interplay between *mod*, *gewitt*, and body in Ulysses' story in OEBo 38.38-49.

9. OEBo 39.1-2.

10. OEBo 39.133-135, 147-149.

11. OEBo 41.152-155.

12. OEBo 5.31-32.

13. OEBo 5.87-88.

14. *Enn.* III.6.1.24-31. All references to the *Enneads* are from Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. A.H. Armstrong, in 7 vols., Cambridge 1966-1988.

15. *Enn.* IV.6.3.15-21.
16. *Enn.* IV.6.3.15-19.
17. *Enn.* IV.6.3.10-15.
18. Cfr. DCP I.m.3, I.pr.5 and 6, also III.m.11 and OEBo ch. 3, 5 and 35 respectively.
19. OEBo 35.2, also note Plotinian imagery of mind's light in OEBo 35.10-11.
20. *Phaedo* 72e-73a.
21. J. Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius de Consolatione Philosophiae*, Berlin 1978, pp. 305-307.
22. OEBo 35.24-28.
23. M. Godden, *The Old English Boethius* cit., 62.
24. Which, according to J. Gruber, *Kommentar* cit., p. 307, itself echoes Plato's ἐπιστήμη... καὶ ὀρθὸς λόγος, *Phaedo* 73a.
25. Cfr. *Icegyrre on mín hús 'revertar to domum meam,'* Bosworth Toller *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* at bosworth.ff.cuni.cz, accessed March 8, 2018.
26. S. Gersh, *The First Principles* cit., p. 117; R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, London 1972, pp. 106, 132-133.
27. *Enn.* V.2.1.8-10.
28. *Enn.* IV.3.17.12-16.
29. *Enn.* VI.9.7.17-23, 9.17-21. Cf. Augustine: *Et inde admonitus redire ad memet ipsum, intravi in intima mea... et vidi... qualicumque oculo animae meae... supra mentem meam, lucem incommutabilem.* *Conf.* VII.10.1.
30. *Enn.* IV.3.25.11-12, 32-34.
31. *Enn.* IV.4.3.1-7.
32. D. Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena*, Cambridge 1990, p. 136.
33. OEBo 12, 14-18.
34. M. Godden, *The Old English Boethius* cit., p. 18.
35. M. Godden, *ivi*, pp. 296-298.
36. Phil. 2:7-8, 2 Cor 8:9.
37. DCP V.pr.6.9-15.
38. OEBo 42.23-30.
39. M. Godden, *The Old English Boethius* cit., 95.
40. *De memoria* 449b28-30.
41. *Enn.* IV.3.25.13-17, *Enn.* IV.4.1.11-16.
42. J.M. Rist's translation from his *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, Cambridge 1997, p. 79.
43. *Ibidem*.
44. D. Carabine, *The Unknown God. Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, Louvain 1995, p. 276.