

“Magis sit Platonicus quam Aristotelicus”:
Interpretations of Boethius’s Platonism in the *Consolatio
Philosophiae* From the Twelfth to the Seventeenth Century¹

LODI NAUTA

I. Boethius’s Consolatio Philosophiae

The popularity of Boethius’s *Consolatio* has always been so overwhelming that we may forget how exceptional this in fact was. For one can hardly think of another book that was translated and commented on so many times over a period of more than thousand years. No other book, except the Bible, attracted the attention of kings, the nobility, clerks, monks and the laity alike, and influenced major writers such as Dante, Jean de Meun, and Chaucer. It was an important source in scholastic debates on free will and divine foreknowledge, and stimulated discussions on natural nobility at the courts of Western Europe.²

The *Consolatio* thus was a key text in the shaping of medieval thought, offering a Christianised version of a Platonic worldview in combination with a Stoic morality of resignation in the face of misfortune. As a kind of theodicy, it tried to find an answer to the question how evil can be understood in a universe created by an omnibenevolent God, as well as answers to such perennial philosophical questions as how human freedom can be reconciled with divine foreknowledge, and what the relationship is between an eternal God, existing outside time, and a world ruled by time.

¹ I am grateful to Robert Black for his criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper.

² For bibliographies see L. Obertello, *Severino Boezio*, Genova 1974, 2 vols; L. Bieler’s edition of the *Consolatio* in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, 94 (Turnhout 1984), xviii-xxxvii. On the Boethian tradition see for example the following volumes: *Congresso internazionale di studi boeziani*, ed. L. Obertello, Rome 1981; *Boethius. His Life, Thought and Influence*, ed. M. Gibson, Oxford 1981; *The Medieval Boethius. Studies in the Vernacular Translations of the De consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. A. J. Minnis, Cambridge 1987; *Chaucer’s Boece and the Medieval Tradition of Boethius*, ed. A. J. Minnis, Cambridge, Woodbridge 1993 (*Chaucer Studies*, 18); *Boethius in the Middle Ages. Latin and Vernacular Traditions of the Consolatio Philosophiae*, ed. M. J. F. M. Hoenen and L. Nauta, Leiden 1997 (*Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters*, 53). N. H. Kaylor Jr., *The Medieval Consolation of Philosophy. An Annotated Bibliography*, New York 1992 (*Garland Medieval Bibliographies*, 7). For the Latin text I have used Bieler’s edition; for the English translation S. J. Tester’s in the Loeb edition prepared by H. F. Stewart and E. K. Rand, *The Theological Tractates. The Consolation of Philosophy*, Cambridge, Mass. 1973.

The literary form of the work – a dialogue between Lady Philosophy and Boethius, couched in alternating prose and verse – invited generations of readers from whatever rank to ‘re-enact’ Boethius’s search for his spiritual homeland by way of introspection and discursive reasoning. It offered moral guidance and intellectual instruction, and made life bearable and understandable in a world apparently governed by arbitrariness, injustice and personal adversity.

Its wide dissemination and popularity, however, was not inevitable. It becomes even paradoxical when we consider the striking absence of any straightforward reference to Christian doctrines or to Christ himself. The Christian Boethius had opted for a consolation by philosophy, that is by reason, not by faith. Of course, reason and faith cannot be easily distinguished in a late-classical author, steeped as he was in Neoplatonic philosophy, but this is essentially the vantage point of a modern historian, a viewpoint that was generally not available to medieval readers.

Another worrying aspect, closely related to the absence of Christian doctrines, was the presence of clearly Platonic, heterodox opinions on the soul. Boethius alludes several times to the pre-existence of the soul, that is, before it had entered a body.³ Concomitant with this pre-existent life was the notion that knowledge is a form of recollection of things the soul had known in a previous life. This was good Platonic teaching, but bad Christian doctrine. According to Christian faith God creates new souls daily for each new-born life. The alternative to this creationist view was the view of the traducionists who believed that souls were created out of their parents’ souls. In both cases the soul had one, unique life after which it was sent to purgatory, hell or heaven, dependent on its moral behaviour (or lack of it) in this one life on earth. Transmigration of souls along Platonic lines was completely at odds with the linear time scheme of Christian eschatology; the Platonic account was therefore duly condemned at a Church Council in 553. At the beginning of the Christian era, however, some theologians, most notably Origen, had accepted the Platonic version of the soul’s origin and life, and even Augustine had toyed with the idea. To make things more difficult for medieval readers, the Platonic doctrine was prominently present in the very authors whose works were so popular in the medieval schools, especially before the thirteenth century, namely Plato (his *Timaeus*), Macrobius, Calcidius, Martianus Capella and Boethius.

³ On the fortunes of this notion see L. Nauta, ‘The Preexistence of the Soul in Medieval Thought’, *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 63 (1996), 93-135.

2. *Types of Argument to Escape ‘the Tyranny of the Letter’*

How did medieval readers and commentators cope with these worrying aspects of Boethius’s text? Before considering some major interpretations in more detail, let me briefly summarise the types of approach that can be distinguished.

1. There were those who were highly sympathetic towards Plato and his philosophy: “nos Platonem diligentes”, as William of Conches wrote. For them the deeper meaning of Plato’s words was not all at odds with Christian doctrine. Plato preferred to speak in fables and metaphors, but what he really meant could very easily be co-ordinated with Christian teaching. Most medieval scholars would have been acquainted with Augustine’s sympathetic treatment of the Platonists in the *De civitate Dei* (especially book eight) and in some of his other works, and though it required some hermeneutic force to adapt the Platonic passages to Christian standards, it was generally believed that such an approach was legitimate and right. Such a favourable treatment of Plato could only result in an even more sympathetic reading of Boethius’s Platonic passages, for he, unlike Plato, was a Christian after all, and author of several treatises on indisputably orthodox Christian doctrines. This did not necessarily lead to a thorough Christianization of the *Consolatio*, in which all traces of Platonic origin were washed away in the baptismal font of Christian hermeneutics. One could simply ‘adapt’ (‘adaptare’) the ‘littera’ of the few controversial passages to the correctly deemed ‘sententia’. This approach will be illustrated below by the commentaries of William of Conches and Nicholas Trevet. Though the interpretation of the latter often made use of Aristotelian-Thomistic terminology, its hermeneutic strategy was similar to William’s, namely the belief that Plato and, ‘a fortiori’, Boethius had a ‘sanus intellectus’, and that the Platonic terminology hid truths which were acceptable to Christian faith.

2. On the other hand, there were those who were highly critical of Platonism, and rejected any attempt at a reconciliation between Christianity and Platonism. If one were honest and consistent, this meant a rejection, for instance, of Boethius’s Platonism – a high price which most commentators were unwilling to pay. Bovo of Corvey from the late ninth century was perhaps Boethius’s severest critic, condemning the Platonic doctrines as ‘inanissimae fabulae’ and Boethius’s words as ‘monstruosa commenta’.⁴ According to Bovo, in many places the *Consolatio* is contrary to faith

⁴ “sed quis tam demens est ut haec monstruosa commenta non procul a fide sua remoueat?”, edited in R. B. C. Huygens, ‘Mittelalterliche Kommentare zum *O qui perpetua*’, *Sacris Erudiri* 6 (1954), 373-427, esp. 397.

(‘fidei contraria’), not only in the famous Platonic hymn ‘O qui perpetua’. Apparently, Boethius’s intention was, Bovo writes, to discuss the doctrines of the philosophers, especially the Platonists’, and not ecclesiastical doctrine.

However, the approach of most commentators lay somewhere between thorough Christianization and outright rejection. Depending on their stance towards Platonism, they tried to formulate extenuating circumstances for Boethius’s apparent heterodox Platonism, suggesting for example, that the intellectual climate in the sixth century was Platonic or, more specifically, that these Platonic doctrines on the soul were not yet condemned as heretical at that time. Thus Giovanni Travesio from the fourteenth century wrote that the Platonic teaching on the descent of the soul is contrary to faith, but that perhaps that teaching was not yet suspect (at least not for Boethius) at the time he wrote the *Consolatio*.⁵ The same argument was used by Renatus Vallinus in his commentary from 1656.⁶

3. Another type of strategy was to play down Boethius’s intellectual allegiance to Platonism. Thus Guilelmus de Cortumelia from the fourteenth century admitted that Boethius imitated the words of the Platonists, but that he did not accept their opinion.⁷ Some went even further and argued that Boethius did not follow Plato at all, but rather Aristotle. As we shall see, this approach was adopted by William of Aragon in the late thirteenth century. The difference between William of Aragon and Trevet, who also appropriated Aristotelian teaching to explain Boethius’s text, is that the former ignored Boethius’s Platonic terminology, arguing that the *Consolatio* is essentially Aristotelian in inspiration.

4. One could also limit one’s task as expositor to a predominantly philological explanation of the text, giving clarifications of words and

⁵ “Sed ista opinio non est secundum fidem nostram catholicam licet pro certo Boetius fuerit secutus Platonem, sed forte tempore illo quo Boetius librum suum composuit, illa opinio non erat reprobata saltem ab eo” (G. Federici Vescovini, ‘Due commenti inediti del XIV secolo al *De consolazione Philosophiae* di Boezio’, *Rivista critica di storia della filosofia* 13 (1958), 385-415, esp. 414).

⁶ See the last section of this article.

⁷ “Determinat de ordinatione animae mundi secundum Platonicos, quorum uerba imitatur hic Boetius, quamuis non teneret opinionem eorum” (on the threefold nature of the world soul). And: “*Si Musa*, id est doctrina, *Platonis personat uerum*, id est si uera est, nihil de nouo addiscit, sed antiqua recordatur. Et tamen non est uerum secundum Philosophiam nec est de mente Boetii” (on knowledge as recollection, book 3 metre 11), quoted by Pierre Courcelle, *La Consolation de Philosophie dans la tradition littéraire. Antécédents et postérité de Boèce*, Paris 1967, 327 from Paris, Bibl. nat. lat. 6773, ff. 159^r and 155^r. Note that Courcelle’s dating of De Cortumelia’s commentary (‘xv^e siècle’, *Consolation*, 327) is erroneous. He died in 1342 (see R. Black and G. Pomaro, *Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy in Italian Medieval and Renaissance Education: Schoolbooks and their glosses in Florentine manuscripts*, SISMEL, Certosa, Florence 2000, 106).

phrases and offering parallels and sources, without putting too much emphasis on Boethius’s Platonism. Such an approach was particularly popular among grammar teachers such as Pietro da Muglio, Giovanni Travesio, Badius Ascensius and Johannes Murnellius, of whom the last two will be discussed below in sections seven and eight. Broadly speaking, they were reluctant to give verdicts on the doctrinal soundness of the opinions expressed in the text.

5. Another type of argument was simply to embrace Boethius’s Platonism wholeheartedly, including the idea of the soul’s pre-existence, but this was of course not an option available to medieval scholars. In the seventeenth century, however, some people appreciated the *Consolatio* precisely for this reason, as I shall indicate in the last section of this article.

Likewise, the problem of the absence of any overt reference to Christian doctrine could elicit various types of answers.

a. One could deny its absence by insisting that the *Consolatio* contained profound Christian teaching. One needed only to look under the shell of Boethius’s words to discover the sweet kernel. This strategy of course went hand in hand with solution (1) above. A famous example is William of Conches’s identification of the Platonic world soul with the Holy Spirit. Another example is offered by Tholomaeus de Asinariis from the fourteenth century, who glosses ‘spiritibus’ (book 4 prose 6) with ‘id est diuino Spiritu sancto’,⁸ and Guilelmus de Cortumelia, also from the fourteenth century, who writes that in book 3 metre 9 Boethius invokes the entire Trinity, namely the Father’s power, the Son’s wisdom and the goodness of the Holy Spirit.⁹

b. One could also turn vice into virtue and argue that Boethius wanted to stress the rational and universal character of divine truth, accessible to all nations, and hence decided not to use the truths of Christian revelation. A typical expression of this ‘sola ratione’ approach can be found in John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus* completed in 1159: “Although this book (that is, the *Consolatio*) is not the expression of the Incarnate Word, yet in the estimation of those who rely on reason it is of no slight importance, since for the purpose of checking grief in a spirit however deeply wounded, it has remedies to offer for everyone. Neither Jew nor Greek under the pretext of

⁸ “id est diuino Spiritu sancto, quia de angelicis spiritibus subiicit. Et ideo dicit de Spiritu sancto in plurali, quia multiplex est, scilicet spiritus, intellectus, consilium etc., ut dicitur in Euangelio”, quoted by Courcelle, *La Consolation de Philosophie*, 320, from Paris, Bibl. nat. lat. 6410, f. 144^v.

⁹ “inuocat totam Trinitatem, scilicet potentiam Patris, sapientiam Filii, bonitatem Spiritus Sancti, et hic modus orationis est optimus”, quoted by Courcelle, *La Consolation de Philosophie*, 327, from Paris, Bibl. nat. lat. 6773, f. 155^v. See n. 7 above.

religion would decline to use its remedies”.¹⁰ This argument was repeated from time to time, for example by the printer William Caxton, who also used the rational and universal character of the divine truth as an explanation of the absence of overtly Christian teaching in the *Consolatio*. In the preface to his 1478 printed edition of Chaucer’s *Boece* he argued that the *Consolatio* provided “as moche as maye and ys possible to be knowen naturelly” about “the predestynacion and prescience of God”.¹¹ And the seventeenth-century Boethian commentator Pierre Cally argued that Boethius’s aim was precisely to show to *all* people that by natural light (‘naturale lumen’) we can gain insight in our true destiny. In the *Consolatio* there is only one place, Cally writes, where Boethius seems to refer to the Bible (in book 3 prose 12: “regit cuncta fortiter suaviterque disponit”, possibly alluding to Wisdom 8, 1), but this fact should not surprise or worry us: Philosophy draws only on natural light, which is nothing else than an idea (‘notio’) of divine origin or one that is implanted in us by nature.¹² According to Cally, Christian faith was built on rational foundations, and Boethius’s text should be praised rather than criticised for exemplifying that truth so well.¹³

c. Another argument was that Boethius, by his untimely death, was deprived of writing a last, sixth book of the *Consolatio* in which he would have sought consolation from theology in lieu of philosophy. This argument was mentioned (though not accepted) by Badius Ascensius in his commentary from 1498 and fully endorsed by Petrus Bertius in his edition of the *Consolatio* from 1620, but was criticised by Pierre Cally sixty years later.¹⁴

¹⁰ John of Salisbury, *Policraticus* VII.15, ed. C. C. J. Webb, Oxford 1909, 155, transl. J. B. Pike, *John of Salisbury. Frivolities of Courtiers and Footprints of Philosophers*, Minneapolis 1938, 274.

¹¹ *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*, ed. W. J. B. Crotch, London 1928 (Early English Text Society, original series, 176), 36.

¹² “Philosophia autem nihil est aliud quam lumen naturale modificatum: lumen quidem, hoc est notio, quae sola est mentis lumen: naturale vero, id est ab ortu divinitus datum, sive a natura insitum ingenitumque; modificatum denique, quatenus est primum clarum et distinctum; deinde paulo longius diffusum; postremo veri certique iudicij norma” (Patrologia Latina 63, 605B, on book 1 prose 3).

¹³ PL 63, 580.

¹⁴ Badius Ascensius in his edition of 1498 (see below section 7) wrote at the end of his commentary that “hec est ultima pars operis scripti quod nonnulli imperfectum adherentur eo quod preventus morte non potuerit alia que conceperat persequi. Bonam tamen ut videbimus conclusionem facit et fere que ad consolationem necessaria videbantur iam dicta sunt”. P. Bertius’s edition of the *Consolatio*, Leiden 1633 (first edition 1620), 44: “Quibus si sextus accessisset de vita aeterna, in quo ostendisset ad vitam illam contendentibus ferenda esse multa adversa, exemplo Christi, Prophetarum, Apostolorum, haberemus plenam et consummatam adversus omnia hujus vitae mala consolationem”. Pierre Cally’s reply: “At tanta quidem fuit Boetii pietas, ut nemini dubium esse possit, quin vir ille sanctissimus, sicut in prosperis, sic in ad-

d. A more drastic solution was to say that Boethius was not a Christian at all or that he was only nominally so. But this of course was defended only in modern times, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by scholars who believed the theological treatises to be spurious. After the publication of the *Anecdoton Holderi* – a fragment from a lost work by Cassiodorus in which he wrote that Boethius “scripsit librum de sancta trinitate et capita quaedam dogmatica et librum contra Nestorium” – by Hermann Usener in 1877, this was no longer a feasible option.¹⁵

These ‘options’ are only meant as rough indications of types of answers which were given in the commentary tradition on the *Consolatio*. Needless to say, they are not exclusive: one can encounter more than one type of argument used by one and the same commentator. Nor is it easy to say what the commentator really thought about Boethius’s position. When one reads a commentator writing to the effect that ‘it is better to chose another line of interpretation rather than this Platonic one in order to save Boethius’, it is not always clear whether the commentator knew that he was twisting the words of his authority. Authorities, as Alain of Lille wrote in the twelfth century, have a waxen nose, which can be deflected in any desired direction.¹⁶ Were all commentators so naïve as to think that their ‘twisted’ interpretations did not distort Boethius’s meaning in some way? Some at least seem to have known better.

3. Courcelle on Later Medieval Commentaries

In what follows I shall discuss several commentaries and study the way in which one coped with Boethius’s Platonism, providing ample evidence of the strategies and arguments which I have briefly set out above. The theme has been discussed by Pierre Courcelle in his influential book *La Consolation de la Philosophie dans la tradition littéraire*. Without belittling the importance of his scholarship, Courcelle’s account has serious limitations and is misleading at various points.¹⁷ His point of view was that of a literary scholar (as the title of his book already indicates). He was

versis Christum cogitaverit. Sed quicumque animo complexus fuerit eam, quam proposuimus, hujus operi ideam, hic certe opus hoc absolutum esse fatebitur: huc enim deductum est, quo lumen naturale sive philosophia, qua, ut cum Tertulliano loquar, mens *est naturaliter Christiana*, poterat tendere” (PL 64, 579B).

¹⁵ See A. Galonnier, *Anecdoton Holderi ou Ordo Generis Cassiodorum: Éléments pour une Étude de l’authenticité Boèceenne des Opuscula Sacra*, Louvain, Paris 1997 (Philosophes Médiévaux, 35), esp. 28-58.

¹⁶ Alain of Lille, *Contra Haereticos* I.30 in PL 210, 333A.

¹⁷ Cf. L. Nauta, ‘Boethius in the Renaissance’, forthcoming in *Boèce ou la chaîne des savoirs*, ed. A. Galonnier, Louvain, Paris 2002.

greatly interested in the influence of the language and ideas of the *Consolatio* on the ‘bonae litterae’, but did not have any sympathy for scholasticism. For Courcelle the later Middle Ages was a barren period, devoid of any literary study and humanist learning. From the twelfth century onwards commentaries began to show scholastic features such as an endless division of the text (‘divisio textus’), the intrusion of scholastic terminology, the insertion of long digressions and a lack of sensitivity to the beauty of Boethius’s style. According to Courcelle, their quality was far inferior to the commentaries of the previous period.¹⁸

Courcelle is harsh on the later medieval commentators: Nicholas Trevet, author of the most popular medieval commentary on Boethius (about 1300), was a mere populariser and plagiariser; William of Aragon’s commentary is devoid of any interest; Pseudo-Aquinas’s commentary “ne présente pas grand intérêt”; Pierre d’Ailly, whose work is called an “effrayante compilation” and “à peine un commentaire”, “consacre de longues pages à la question mais oublie Boèce”, showing “bien les défauts de l’enseignement à cette époque”; the work of Regnier de Saint-Trond “ne présente pas grande originalité”; Pietro da Muglio “se contente d’une paraphrase de type scolaire”, while Giovanni Travesio is “un pédant prolix et fastidieux”; Denys the Carthusian’s commentary, though “plus original”, “est fort pédant, suivant la mode d’époque: cours complet de scolastique, dont Boèce n’est que le prétexte”. And when, after having listed the authors quoted by d’Ailly in his commentary, he exclaims: “De Boèce seul il n’est plus question”, one can easily imagine Courcelle sitting in the Salle des Manuscrits of the Bibliothèque Nationale, bowed over a late-medieval manuscript, shaking his head softly in despair and disbelief. Light at the end of the tunnel is finally provided by Badius Ascensius, whose commentary “est l’indice de l’esprit nouveau que développait la Renaissance”. But it was too late, for according to Courcelle, the humanists lost interest in the *Consolatio*, preferring the study of the “grands classiques”: “L’intérêt littéraire de la *Consolation* s’est lui-même évanoui sous l’amas des commentaires scolastiques des XIV^e et XV^e siècles”.

Courcelle’s negative judgement of the achievements of the later medieval commentators is most visible in the case of Nicholas Trevet, about whose enormous popularity in the Middle Ages he is extremely surprised. According to Courcelle, Trevet is content to plagiarise the commentary of William of Conches except for William’s “interprétation platonicienne”

¹⁸ “leur qualité est loin d’atteindre celle des commentaires étudiés aux chapitres précédents” (*La Consolation de Philosophie*, 318). For the following quotations in my text see *ibid.*, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 325 and 332. Courcelle was however not only negative about later medieval commentaries. On the twelfth-century compilation, once attributed to Scotus Eriugena, he writes: “Une telle compilation ne mérite pas qu’on s’y arrête davantage” (304).

which Trevet replaced by his own “interprétation aristotélicienne, avec un mépris non dissimulé pour Guillaume”.

From the quotations given above it is clear that Courcelle failed to realise a simple point, namely that commentaries could serve more purposes than giving a mere explanation of the text. Though textual exegesis remained the primary function, it was often supplemented with (and could even be absorbed by) a discussion of other issues which were only remotely relevant to an understanding of the text. A commentary could be used as a tool for teaching *and* ‘research’, advancing or communicating old and new ideas, extending the traditional body of knowledge, discussing themes which were debated at that time. Commentaries should therefore not be judged solely on the basis of their merits in explaining the text. One misses the point if one uses the standards required of a modern commentary as a standard, and this is precisely what Courcelle seems to have done.

Another influential view defended by Courcelle also stands in need of correction. His claim that the humanists lost interest in the *Consolatio* flies in the face of the historical evidence. One need only think of the numerous printed editions before 1500 (no fewer than sixty) or of the continuous activity of glossing and translating to see that Boethius found ever new readers. A closer look at the material (both manuscripts and printed editions) suggests that its proper place in the curriculum was in the pre-university years, that is, in the grammar schools and in the religious houses before students were sent to university. A recent study of Florentine manuscripts, for example, has shown that the *Consolatio* was actually the most widely and intensively studied school author in later medieval and early Renaissance Italy.¹⁹ It was required reading in lay and communal schools, that is, between the elementary and university levels.

Anthony Grafton is another scholar who has made some brief remarks about the ‘fortuna’ of the *Consolatio* in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. According to him “the early humanists were not quite sure what to

¹⁹ See the important study-cum-catalogue of R. Black and G. Pomaro, *Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy in Italian Medieval and Renaissance Education*. Out of over 1,300 manuscripts extant in Florentine libraries, the authors have identified about 325 which can be regarded as schoolbooks (covering all the major school authors, including Cicero, Claudian, Horace, Juvenal, Lucan, Ovid, Persius, Sallust, Seneca the Tragedian, Statius, Terence, Valerius Maximus and Vergil, as well as minor authors, who were read in the grammar schools of medieval and renaissance Florence). A sure sign of its popularity is the fact that the thirty-seven MSS of the *Consolatio* found in Florentine libraries and identified as schoolbooks, constitute the largest number of MSS for any school text in the survey by Robert Black and Gabriella Pomaro. Among this group there are twelve copies signed as schoolbooks – again, the largest number of signed school MSS for any author in the survey.

make of Boethius”.²⁰ “Even the *Consolatio*, though clearly a masterpiece of a sort, was couched in a peculiar combination of literary genres and an unfamiliar brand of Latin prose. No classic of Latin literature made the humanists more uneasy.” But when he comes to substantiate this claim, Grafton does not give much evidence: the early humanists he cites on the *Consolatio*, namely Petrarch and Salutati, are quite clear about how much they valued the book. The only piece of evidence Grafton cites has to do with Boethius’s condemnation of the Muses, which made humanists uneasy.²¹

This, however, cannot be counted as an argument about Boethius’s style. Grafton cites, of course, Valla’s notorious attack on Boethius, but rather than expressing a widely held view, Valla was severely taken to task by his contemporaries on precisely his harsh words. Grafton then suggests that a change in the character of Italian humanism also brought humanists to read the works of Boethius with more sympathy. He gives two reasons. Boethius had written extensively on subjects in which later humanists were much interested: formal dialectic, music and mathematics. Second, because the composition of poetry became increasingly important in the schools, humanists began to appreciate the poetry in the *Consolatio*. Humanists had a high opinion of his verse, though his prose was often found faulty. And here some evidence is given: Erasmus could not believe that they were written by the same author.²² Julius Caesar Scaliger wrote that Boethius’s “poems are plainly divine; there is nothing more refined, or serious”.²³

²⁰ A. Grafton, ‘Epilogue: Boethius in the Renaissance’, *Boethius. His Life, Thought, and Influence*, ed. M. Gibson, Oxford 1981, 410-415, esp. 410. Cf. L. Nauta, ‘Boethius in the Renaissance’, forthcoming.

²¹ On this issue see Letizia Panizza, ‘Italian humanists and Boethius: was Philosophy for or against Poetry?’, *New Perspectives on Renaissance Thought. Essays in the history of science and philosophy in memory of Charles B. Schmitt*, ed. John Henry and Sarah Hutton, London 1990, 48-67. She discusses the defences of Boethius by Mussato, Petrarch, Boccaccio and Salutati. An element, frequently encountered in their interpretations of the passage in which Lady Philosophy banned the Muses (book 1 prose 1), is that Boethius distinguished between two kinds of Muses: the ‘scenicae meretriculae’, representing low, obscene poetry and ‘Lady Philosophy’s muses’ (‘meis Musis’), that is, serious poetry conveying philosophical or scientific truths. Panizza does not, however, mention the fact that the most important and influential commentators in the medieval period already made such a distinction, namely William of Conches and Nicholas Trevet (highly popular in fifteenth-century Italy, more popular than Ps-Thomas pace Panizza, 55; see Black and Pomaro’s book quoted in n. 19 above), though she quotes Ps-Thomas, whom she locates in ‘the enemy camp’ vis-à-vis the humanists (62). Salutati, for example, was much indebted to Trevet’s commentary.

²² Erasmus, *De copia* I.11, in *Opera*, ed. J. Leclerc, Leiden 1703-06, i.col. 12: Boethius “was so unlike himself in his verses that scholars can scarcely believe that they were written by his own unaided efforts” (transl. *On copia of words and ideas*, D. B. King and H. David Rix, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1963, 23-24).

²³ “divina sane sunt, nihil illius cultius, nihil gravius” (PL 63, 541-2; Grafton, ‘Boethius in the Renaissance’, 413).

Grafton could have added the name of the Swiss scholar Glareanus who even went as far as to question the authenticity of the *Consolatio* in his edition of 1546, thinking the work unworthy of a supposedly Christian author.²⁴ But this uneasiness felt by some later humanists shows that it is difficult to argue for a change in the attitude of humanists towards the *Consolatio* in the second half of the fifteenth century. Such a change might have occurred with regards to the reading of Boethius’s other works (as Grafton suggests), but the evidence presented by Grafton seems to show that such a change cannot be applied to the entire Boethian corpus ‘tout court’. If, as Grafton has argued, “no classic of Latin literature made the humanists more uneasy”, this uneasiness was apparently not of a very serious character. For generations of humanists read the *Consolatio* with their pupils, and printers continued to print the text. Two important examples will be discussed in sections seven and eight below.

It is however in particular Courcelle’s influential account that I shall have to correct in several ways in what follows. I shall concentrate on the various ways in which commentators tried to cope with Boethius’s Platonic themes, especially his teachings on the soul, because it was this theme which was invariably connected with the name of Plato in the Boethian commentaries. A lexicographic approach will be adopted in order to see what the medieval scholars themselves had in mind when they referred to ‘Plato’ and the ‘Platonici’, and used phrases such as ‘more Platonico’, ‘sententia Platonica’, and ‘dogma Platonicum’.

4. William of Conches: “*Nos Platonem Diligentes*”

The first approach I distinguished above, namely the argument that Boethius’s Platonism is not at odds at all with Christian doctrine, can be best illustrated by the commentaries of William of Conches and Nicholas Trevet. They have often been portrayed as antithetical works: the first as a prototype of twelfth-century Platonism, the second as a typical product of Aristotelian scholasticism. But as will be shown, their hermeneutic strategies have much in common. They both aim at extracting the profound meaning (‘sententia’), which could be co-ordinated with the ‘sententiae’ of other authorities, especially Christian doctrine.²⁵

²⁴ His preface is reprinted in PL 63, 537-542; “longe maiorem gratiam habet carmen quam jejuna illa prosa” and “mihi quidem magis philosophicum opus videtur quam Christianum”.

²⁵ A. J. Minnis and L. Nauta, ‘*More Platonico loquitur*. What Nicholas Trevet really did to William of Conches’, *Chaucer’s Boece*, ed. Minnis, 1-33.

William of Conches was certainly a great admirer of Plato, and counted himself among those who loved Plato – “nos Platonem diligentes”.²⁶ His general conviction about the validity of Plato’s philosophy and of those who followed in his footsteps remained unshaken during his life: even if Plato sounded heretical in some of his formulations, his words hid deeper layers of profound teaching which could easily be reconciled with Christian teaching: in fact they were just another formulation of it.

4.1. The Creation of the Universe

According to Boethius’s Platonic account of the creation of the universe in book 3 metre 9, God orders primordial matter with forms and numbers, bringing the elements under rules. In his comment on this passage, William criticises those who have argued that God created chaos or the confusion of elements at the beginning of time.²⁷ “That seems to me, from the words of Plato and other philosophers, to be an error, and to affirm heresy against the divine goodness.” Having refuted their claim that the elements were created first in a state of chaos, William returns to Plato’s view that God had reduced the primordial matter (‘inordinata iactatio’) to order. He tries to reconcile Plato’s words with his own view that God did not create chaos first before bringing order into it. According to William, Plato’s words must be understood as follows: the natural movement of the elements is chaotic or orderless (‘inordinata’), for earth moves downwards, fire upwards, et cetera. So God brought order in the elements, not because they were ever in disorder or were in a different place than they are now, but because they *would have been in disorder* were it not for God’s ordering act.²⁸ Likewise, by the term ‘flowing matter’ Boethius designates the four elements in as much as they are contrary to each other and tend to separate; in his composition God reduced them to order and by his governance he conserves his composition.

²⁶ *Glosae super Platonem*, ed. E. Jeaneau, Paris 1965 (Textes Philosophiques du Moyen Age, 13), 211.

²⁷ Cf. Minnis and Nauta, ‘*More Platonico loquitur*’, 19-20, though my emphasis is different here. All references to William’s text are to my edition *Guillelmi de Conchis Glosae super Boetium*, Turnhout 1999 (Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis, 158). This section (4.1) is based on 153-156 of the edition.

²⁸ “Ex inordinata ergo iactatione ea ordinavit, non quia umquam inordinata esset eorum iactatio aliter quam modo est, sed quia, cum ex natura possint esse inordinata, tamen unicuique dando locum conuenientem ea ordinavit” (ed. Nauta, 155); “Sed hanc inordinatam iactationem deus redegit in ordinem, non quia umquam esset in eis inordinata iactatio, sed quia esset nisi deus talibus locis elementa diserneret” (ibid., 156).

William’s attempt to save Plato from having subscribed to the view that God created the elements in confusion is hardly convincing, for one may rightly ask: From where did the elements derive their *natural* movement contrary to each other? Only from God of course. But in that case, God indeed first created chaos. Such an explanation in terms of an hypothetical situation (“the elements *would have been in disorder* were it not for God’s ordering act”) can also be illustrated by William’s comment on Boethius’s account of the pre-existence of the souls.

4.2. The Pre-Existence of the Souls and Knowledge as Recollection

According to Boethius’s account in the famous hymn ‘O qui perpetua’ (*Consolatio*, book 3 metre 9) God had created souls at the beginning of time and had given them ‘light chariots’ (‘*leues currus*’) fitting the soul’s heavenly nature. When their time had come, souls glided down to the earth, and on union with a body, they lost their perfect knowledge. However, some ‘seeds of truth’ (‘*semen ueri*’) in the soul remained, and these can be stirred by ‘learning’s breeze’, as Boethius poetically writes, that is, by study and doctrine. Knowledge is recollection of things the soul had known in a previous life.

In his comment on these lines, William begins by saying that some people have condemned Boethius, believing that he had said that God created all souls simultaneously and placed each of them on top of a companion star, whence they proceeded into human bodies.²⁹ But here Boethius, as William notes correctly, is following Plato, and so one should first find out what Plato thought, bearing in mind, as William reminds his reader on several occasions, that Plato often spoke about philosophy through a veil.³⁰ In fact, Plato does not seem to have said anywhere that all souls were created together, but what he did say was that souls were placed by God on top of the stars (*Timaeus* 41d-e). William then offers two

²⁹ For the next section see William’s *Glosae*, ed. Nauta, 174-175. Cf. Nauta, ‘The Preexistence of the Soul’, 117-121.

³⁰ For occurrences of the term ‘*integumentum*’ see *Glosae*, book 3 metre 11 and book 5 prose 2 (ed. Nauta, 192:78-80 and 297:99) both referring to book 3 metre 9 where William does not, however, use the term; see *Glosae super Platonem*, ed. Jeauneau, 150 and 211 and elsewhere (see the index to his edition). The classic studies are E. Jeauneau, ‘L’usage de la notion d’*integumentum* à travers les gloses de Guillaume de Conches’, *Archives d’histoire doctrinale littéraire du Moyen Age* 24 (1957), 35-100, reprinted in his *Lectio Philosophorum. Recherches sur l’Ecole de Chartres*, Amsterdam 1973, 127-192 and P. Dronke, *Fabula. Explorations into the Uses of Myth in Medieval Platonism*, Leiden 1974 (Mittellateinische Studien und Texte, 9), but see my remarks in the introduction to my edition of William’s *Glosae* (xxxvii, n. 54).

interpretations of this phrase ‘on top of the stars’: (1) By the soul’s reason man transcends the stars and discovers the creator beyond them. Therefore, Plato said that God placed souls on top of stars (in the sense of above the stars), since man derives this power of transcendence from God. (2) Alternatively, God placed the souls on the stars in the sense that He made souls in such a way that the influence of the stars enabled them to exist in human bodies. For stars cause warmth, chills, infirmities and the like in men.

Having seen what Plato meant, William continues, we can see that Boethius spoke according to one of these two understandings. In line with the first interpretation – ‘on top of the stars’ in the sense of beyond the stars – the light chariots can be identified with reason and intellect: they are said to be the chariots of the soul because they bring the soul to knowledge of heavenly and earthly things. In line with the second understanding, the light chariots are stars. They bring the soul to the body in the sense that by stellar influence the soul is able to exist in the human body.³¹

But as William has now got rid of the idea of a previous life of the soul, which he explicitly rejects, what remains of the notion of the soul’s perfect knowledge that it had possessed when it was not yet joined to a body? What about the notion of the ‘seeds of truth’? William interprets the ‘seeds of truth’ as designating the soul’s ability to understand, that is its natural power of understanding. The seed germinates when stirred by study or doctrine. If the body had not weighed it down, the soul, *because of its very nature* (my emphasis), would have known all that men could know. But because the soul is joined to a body it needs exercise and learning in order to retain its natural power of understanding. The structure of this argument is similar to the one we have considered above about the natural disorder of the elements (compare “if God would not have reduced the elements to order, they would have been in disorder because of their very nature”): a hypothetical situation, which is only posited as a ‘per impossibile’ event, is used to explain the current situation (the order of the elements; the imperfect knowledge of the soul), but the hypothetical situation represents on the other hand often natural conditions of things (the *natural* movements of the elements; the soul’s *natural* ability to know all things).

³¹ In his commentary on the *Timaeus* William stressed that ‘on top’ in the first alternative should not be taken “localiter” but “causaliter”. The second, ‘astrological’, interpretation was favoured by William, and is found in a number of medieval authors (see Nauta, ‘Preexistence of the Soul’, 119 n. 79), most notably in Dante, *Paradiso* iv, 37-63. For a discussion of Dante’s position see B. Nardi, ‘L’origine dell’anima umana secondo Dante’, in his *Studi di filosofia medievale*, Rome 1979, 9-68, and P. Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions*, Cambridge 1986, 25-31, who also discusses William of Conches.

Thus, a fall of the soul along Platonic lines is rejected, but William certainly thinks of a way in which the fall of the Platonic soul could stand for that of the Christian soul. In his commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus*, he retains much of this interpretation, but adds that when Plato wrote that God bade the souls to gaze at the nature of the universals, Plato hinted at (‘insinuat’) the soul’s first condition: “For God gave the first human soul perfect understanding, free will and insoluble essence. Hence, the first man had a perfect understanding at his creation not on account of any doctrine or experience but solely on account of the grace of its creator”.³² As a result of Adam’s sin, souls lost their perfect knowledge while they kept their insoluble nature, and “to this ‘sententia’ we have to adapt the ‘littera’”, William concludes. The verb ‘adaptare’ is revealing, for it shows that for William the gap between Platonic and Christian teaching on this point could easily be bridged, and that at the level of the deeper meaning, they were not in any way antithetical.

Whether William really bridges this gap is another question. One may argue that this type of interpretation hardly does justice to the difference between the fall of the Platonic soul, which is a recurrent event and presupposes a pre-existent life, and Adam’s fall, which was a unique event. And it is even less easy to link the Platonic fall with the fall of *any* Christian soul, for either God must then be credited with the daily creation of imperfect and even tainted souls (which contradicts William’s assertion that only after the conjunction of soul and body, which is the same for all men, does the soul turn to a vicious or a virtuous life³³) or the soul’s loss of knowledge on the entry of a body refers not to that conjunction but to a later phase, in which case the Platonic terminology is used in a misleading way.

This Platonic terminology – a loss of knowledge on the entry of the soul in the body, the recovery of such knowledge by learning, the body as a hindrance to the natural functioning of the soul, the remaining seeds and the soul’s return to its source – was so deeply ingrained in Christian thinking (witness just the *Consolatio* itself) that it was difficult to see that this language makes real sense only in its original Platonic context, when it refers to a previous life in which the soul had once known that perfect knowledge which was then lost on entering the body. For while the soul’s *return* to its source and creator – a return which the Christian soul had in common with its Platonic counterpart – was a crucial element in the Christian scheme, its divine creation did not run parallel with the Platonic ‘processio’ and thus with the pre-existence of the Platonic soul and its descent through the planetary spheres.

³² *Glosae super Platonem*, ed. Jeauneau, 213.

³³ *Glosae super Platonem*, ed. Jeauneau, 215.

William's interpretation reflects something of the strains which Christian thinking on the soul had to learn to tolerate, using as it did a Platonic idiom while rejecting the doctrines behind that idiom. Guided by his conviction, however, that the words of Plato and Boethius may sound at times heretical but that behind these words a profound meaning could be discovered in accordance with Christian truth, he exclaims in his Plato commentary: "But is it any wonder that at times Plato spoke as an Academician? For if he had always spoken correctly ('bene'), he would not have been an Academician. However, if someone takes notice not only of the words used by Plato but also of their meaning, he will not find any heresy but indeed the most profound philosophy, covered by veils of words".³⁴ This is a fine expression of William's entire approach. He apparently does not consider his interpretation as a rescue operation of challenged authors, for they need no rescue operation: Plato and, 'a fortiori', Boethius are no heretics. It may be for this reason that William does not deem it necessary to discuss the absence of overtly Christian doctrines in the *Consolatio*. He also passes over the chance to notice that in book 3 prose 12 Boethius seems clearly to allude to Wisdom 8, 1.³⁵

³⁴ *Glosae super Platonem*, ed. Jeauneau, 211.

³⁵ For William's identification of the Platonic world soul with the Holy Spirit, which he later withdrew under ecclesiastical pressure, see my edition 169-173: "Plato had said that the world soul was 'excogitata' from God, *because* the Holy Spirit, that is the divine love, by which everything exists, proceeds from God" (my italics). Note William's formulation: it is almost as if Plato's opinion was influenced by (latent) ideas on the Holy Spirit. Cf. Minnis and Nauta, '*More Platonico loquitur*', 21-22. Apart from these references to Plato, the name of Plato occurs regularly in William's commentary but in a more incidental way: ed. Nauta, 41 (on Plato's Academy), 68 (a brief quotation), 71 (on Plato and his master Socrates about whom William writes that he was put to death because he refused to swear by the gods, believing that there is only one God), 81 (on the utility of the eyes), 102 (brief quotation), 151 (brief quotation), 162-164 (on those who have wrongly appropriated Plato's authority for their view that each element is composed of all the other elements), 165 (brief quotation), 257 (the term 'archetipus mundus'), as well as a few references to William's forthcoming commentary on the *Timaeus*.

5. *Nicholas Trevet: Plato’s ‘Sanus Intellectus’*

My second example of the first strategy of coping with Boethius’s Platonism is the commentary by Nicholas Trevet, written about 1300. It was by far the most widely read commentary on the *Consolatio* in the Middle Ages, and for good reason. Trevet was a fine scholar with surprisingly wide reading and a sense of historical perspective. His Boethius commentary was only the first in an impressive series of expositions of books of the Bible and (late-)classical works, some of which no one had tackled before such as the younger Seneca’s tragedies, the elder Seneca’s *Declamationes*, Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* and Livy’s *Ab urbe condita*. Living at a time in which several Dominicans were engaged in a reasoned, undogmatic defence of Thomistic positions, it is natural to see him drawing on Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy to clarify Boethius’s text.³⁶

This does not mean, however, that he neglected Boethius’s Platonism nor that he was hostile to it. Like William of Conches, Trevet did not doubt seriously that behind Plato’s words a sane, acceptable philosophy was to be found. As Trevet reminded his readers several times, Plato often transmitted his philosophy in fables and metaphors, in the manner of ancient theologians, and “therefore Boethius, particularly in his metres, where he is retaining the poetic style, uses Platonic terms, which are acceptable with a reasonable understanding (‘sano intellectu’)”.³⁷ Far from being unsympathetic to this figurative way of speaking, Trevet follows Macrobius in fully accepting as legitimate the category of fabulous narratives which proceed by “honest words” and which are the property of philosophers. He cites Boethius’s myth of Orpheus, Plato’s myth of Er and Cicero’s account of Scipio’s dream as examples of these fables, and his interpretation of the Platonic account on the soul clearly seems to imply that Plato’s ‘fabulae’ must be placed in this category too.³⁸

The reason why Trevet believes that the Platonic terms are acceptable “with a reasonable understanding” is that Plato probably had a “good understanding” of the controversial issues. Trevet cautiously accepts Au-

³⁶ See L. Nauta, ‘The Scholastic Context of Nicholas Trevet’s Commentary on Boethius’, *Boethius in the Middle Ages*, ed. Hoenen and Nauta, 41-67. I have used *Nicholas Trevet on Boethius. Expositio Fratris Nicolai Trevethii Anglici Ordinis Predicatorum super Boecio De Consolatione*, typescript of the unfinished edition by the late E. T. Silk, as well as the extracts (book 3 metre 9 and book 3 metre 11) from the Silk text plus translations (made by A. B. Scott) in *Chaucer’s Boece and the Medieval Tradition of Boethius*, ed. Minnis, 36-81.

³⁷ Ed. Silk in Minnis (ed.), 53; transl. Scott, 79.

³⁸ At the beginning of his commentary on book 4, Trevet writes with regard to Boethius’s myth of Orpheus that it offers both delight and wisdom, comparing the way in which Plato proves the value of ‘quaedam fabulae’ in the *Timaeus*. See Minnis and Nauta, ‘*More Platónico loquitur*’, 11-14, for text and discussion.

gustine's suggestion that Plato had had some acquaintance with the account in Genesis of the creation of the universe and even might have taken "some of his ideas from it", but rejected the suggestion made by William of Conches, that by the words "the Spirit of the Lord was borne over the waters" Plato had understood the Holy Spirit. For, as Augustine had written, "by the 'Spirit' Plato understood air".³⁹ From the reading of such works as Augustine's *De civitate Dei* and Macrobius's *In somnium Scipionis*, Trevet probably derived his knowledge of the distinction between Plato and 'Platonici'.⁴⁰ Not every 'sententia Platonica' should be ascribed to Plato. In some cases, followers of Plato have misinterpreted their master's poetic voice, and deviated from the truth. But elsewhere Trevet strikes a more positive note when he mentions the interpretation of some 'Platonici nobiliores' and takes account of their views.⁴¹ This general approach to Plato and Platonism is amply illustrated by Trevet's careful handling of Boethius's text.

5.1. The Creation of the Universe

In his comment on Boethius's Platonic account of the creation of the universe and the role of primordial matter, Trevet first paraphrases Boethius's source, Plato's *Timaeus*, and then proceeds to give two interpretations. First, God may be understood to have created first the primal elements of things in an unformed state, then to have ordered them. "That is what the literal meaning of Genesis appears to assert, of which Plato is believed to have acquired a knowledge in some way, and even to have taken some of his ideas from it."⁴² Does this mean that God in the beginning

³⁹ Ed. Silk in Minnis (ed.), 46, transl. Scott, 69; see Augustine, *De civitate Dei* VIII.11. *De civitate Dei* must have played an important formative role of Trevet's understanding of Platonism, classical learning and ancient history. Later in his career he wrote a commentary on this work, the first to do so. On this commentary see B. Smalley, 'Thomas Waleys, OP', *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 24 (1954), 50-107, esp. 86-98, and T. Kaepelli, 'Une critique du commentaire de Nicolas Trevet sur le *De civitate Dei*', *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 29 (1959), 200-205. Already in the early Boethius commentary Trevet quotes *De civitate Dei* regularly. I counted 25 references and quotations: Book 18 is quoted eight times, book 8 five times, books 1 and 9 each three times, books 5 and 10 each two times, book 4 and 15 each once. (References are to Silk's edition: 72, 73, 75, 116, 262, 263, 396, 398, 411, 548, 559, 562, 559, 585, 591, 605, 606, 632, 633, 664, 746, 784). Compare this number with the three references to *De trinitate* in the entire commentary (325, 586, 715), two to *De genesi ad litteram libri XII* (679, 753), one to *De doctrina christiana* (429), one to *De libero arbitrio* (581), one to *Speculum* (587), and one to a sermon (662).

⁴⁰ Ed. Silk in Minnis (ed.), 41; transl. Scott, 62.

⁴¹ Ed. Silk in Minnis (ed.), 50, 53 and 41; transl. Scott, 75, 79, and 62.

⁴² Ed. Silk in Minnis (ed.), 39-40; transl. Scott, 61.

created the elements in a state of confusion and disorganisation, that is, something imperfect? No, as long as we take “imperfect” as meaning “lacking that order which it is going to have in the future”.

In view of Trevet’s alleged hostility towards anything Platonic, it is remarkable that Trevet here defends Plato against the ‘commentator’, namely William of Conches, who condemned this view, “from the words of Plato and other philosophers”, as heresy against the divine goodness (see above). After refuting some arguments of the ‘commentator’, Trevet introduces another exposition because the first exposition presupposes that Plato thought the universe had a beginning, and while Augustine thinks that this indeed is Plato’s opinion, ‘Platonici nobiliores’ have said that Plato thought the universe not to have a beginning. This can be interpreted that the state of confusion in primordial matter came before their ordering, but was not prior in order of time, but prior in nature, “for left to themselves they would be in a disordered state of flux and would be destroyed, not just in part, but totally”.⁴³ This is similar to William of Conches’s explanation. Here too the emphasis falls on the divine control of the ‘discordia concors’ of the elements, which perpetually make war against each other.

Thus, even in a more disturbing reading of Plato’s view, Trevet is willing to accept Plato’s opinion in a good sense, following in fact in the footsteps of those Platonists whom Augustine had explicitly rejected in the *De civitate Dei*. For Augustine believed that Plato’s words referred to a beginning of time, not to a relation of dependence. The reason why Trevet does not quote Augustine’s rejection of the Platonists’ interpretation is not hard to find: Boethius himself seems to draw on this distinction of ‘prior in order of time’ and ‘prior in order of nature’ in his discussion of the eternity of the world in prose 6 of book 5.⁴⁴ In his comment on this prose section Trevet’s position remains therefore ambiguous. He wants to side with Augustine in interpreting Plato’s *Timaeus* as an argument for a temporal beginning; on the other hand Boethius clearly interprets Plato as having argued for a relation of dependence. For Boethius writes that “God should not be held to be more ancient in time but rather by his own simplicity of nature”.⁴⁵ When Boethius concludes that “following Plato we should say that God indeed is eternal, but that the world is perpetual”, Trevet cannot

⁴³ Ed. Silk in Minnis (ed.), 41; transl. Scott, 62. Cf. Minnis and Nauta, ‘*More Platonico loquitur*’, 19-20, where, however, Trevet’s gloss on book 5 prose 6 is not taken into account and Trevet’s position vis-à-vis Augustine’s rejection of the Platonists not analyzed.

⁴⁴ Boethius’s heterodox solution was rejected in his day by the Christian Neoplatonists, Zacharias and Philoponus. See Courcelle, *La Consolation de Philosophie*, 229. It was also too daring for the orthodoxy of twelfth-century theologians, as P. Dronke has observed. See his ‘New Approaches to the School of Chartres’, *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* 6 (1969), 117-140, esp. 137-139

⁴⁵ Transl. Tester, 425 (Loeb).

but gloss “according to the exposition of those Platonists who were spoken of above”.⁴⁶ But again he does not face (or does not want to face) the obvious fact that Boethius’s account is at odds with Augustine’s. The fact that he cannot choose between two different interpretations of Plato’s words shows that he is not, *pace* Courcelle and others, an anti-Platonist at all.⁴⁷

5.2. The World Soul

My second example concerns the world soul. Plato had considered the universe to be made up of physical nature, namely the four elements, and a soul “which he supposed resided in the moving forces of the circles”.⁴⁸ The world soul is not – *pace* the ‘commentator’ – to be equated with the Holy Spirit, because Plato could not have arrived at a knowledge of it. Otherwise, he would not have said for example that it was adapted to a body, that it was made up of the same and the different “and many other things which in no way can be said about God”.⁴⁹ Trevet seeks to excuse Plato by arguing that by the world soul Plato understood “the moving forces of the circles (or orbits), whose power, through movement, is diffused throughout all corporeal matter”. This reading reflects Plato’s intention in the *Timaeus*, on which Trevet then proceeds to draw to defend this interpretation. When we accept this view of the world soul, Trevet writes, it will be easier to strip away Plato’s camouflage or ‘coverings’ (‘enucleare integumenta Platonis’) about the constitution of the world soul. After a long discussion, in which he invokes the aid of Macrobius in clarifying the numerical constitution of the world soul, he concludes that “once all this is seen, the ‘littera’ of the text (of Boethius) is clear”,⁵⁰ and a modern reader can only agree.

⁴⁶ “*Itaque si digna* [*Consolatio* book 5 prose 6] docet quo modo loquendum est de Deo et de mundo subposito secundum opinionem Platoniam quod mundus non inceptus esse dicens *itaque si Platonem sequentes* scilicet secundum expositionem illorum Platoniorum de quibus supra dictum est (...)” (ed. Silk, 788).

⁴⁷ Cf. book 5 prose 1, where Boethius writes that “for that nothing comes from nothing is a true opinion, which none of the ancients ever contested (...) though they applied it not to the creative principle but to the material subject to it” (transl. Tester, 387). In his comment on this passage Trevet singles out Plato as one of the more noble ancient philosophers who had already clearly recognised that this maxim should apply to other causes than the material one only: “Verum Boecius utitur ista propositione (ex nichilo nichil est) non solum referendo hoc ad causam materialem sed etiam ad efficientem, quemadmodum nobiliorum philosophorum erat intentio. Unde Plato in secundo Thimei dicit, nichil fit cuius ortum causa legitima non precessit, intendens non de causa materiali sed de efficiente” (ed. Silk, 674).

⁴⁸ Ed. Silk in Minnis (ed.), 43; transl. Scott, 65.

⁴⁹ Ed. Silk in Minnis (ed.), 46; transl. Scott, 69.

⁵⁰ Ed. Silk in Minnis (ed.), 49; transl. Scott, 73.

Trevet’s careful procedure is also revealed by his exposition of Boethius’s verse, “You bind the elements of the world with law”. He gives three explanations, “according as the elements are looked at in three different ways”.⁵¹ After discussing them in detail, he concludes that, though the first and second expositions seem to be merely hinted at in the text of the *Consolatio*, they seem “much more to reveal the intention of the *Timaeus*, from which that which is said here is taken”.⁵²

5.3. The Pre-Existence of Souls and Knowledge as Recollection

Trevet’s comments on the Platonic doctrine of the pre-existence of souls, to which Boethius alludes several times, shows him at his most inventive. Taken in its literal sense, this was of course pagan teaching which could not be accepted. Trevet is adamant that Boethius did not subscribe to such a notion: he thought ‘catholice’ about it, in spite of his Platonic formulations.⁵³ But what about Plato himself? Trevet chooses his words cautiously and repeatedly hedges by inserting a balanced ‘videtur’: Plato *seems* to have said these things, Plato *seems* to have hinted at the doctrine in the *Meno*, et cetera. At other times he ascribes it to “some Platonists”, and calls it a ‘sententia Platonica’ or ‘sententia Platoniorum’ rather than a ‘sententia Platonis’. Yet, Trevet was honest enough to admit that an explanation of Boethius’s Platonic terminology in terms of the descent of souls into bodies and their loss of knowledge upon embodiment makes “the literal sense (‘littera’) more clear but the deeper meaning (‘sententia’) will be false”.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ed. Silk in Minnis (ed.), 43; transl. Scott, 66.

⁵² Ed. Silk in Minnis (ed.), 46; transl. Scott, 69. Trevet’s third exposition, which is an arithmetical reading of the connections among the elements, had become part of the Boethian commentary tradition at an early stage, for example in Adalbold of Utrecht’s commentary (beginning of the eleventh century), and was based on Boethius’s *De institutione arithmetica* ii.46. It is not clear to me why Trevet thinks that only the first two expositions are merely hinted at in the text, for this is true of the third one as well.

⁵³ See Trevet’s comment on book 5 prose 2. In this section Boethius writes that the looser the connection is between soul and body, the more free the soul is. In his comment on this passage Trevet writes that King Alfred was right in assigning the degrees of freedom to the entire man, not to the soul alone, for such a reading is more consonant with the truth and with the intention of Boethius, who undoubtedly thought as a catholic Christian about the creation of the souls (“Et sumitur argumentum pro expositione ista, quod Boecius non in homine sed significanter in ipsa anima hos gradus libertatis distinguit. Aluredus tamen Anglorum rex disponit istam diuersitatem in ipsis hominibus et hoc est magis consonum ueritati et intencioni Boecii quem non est dubium Catholice de creacione animarum sensisse”, ed. Silk, 690).

⁵⁴ On book 5 metre 3, ed. Silk, 715.

One of the first allusions to the challenged doctrine is in book 3 metre 6 where Boethius speaks about “the one Father of all things (who) locked into limbs spirits brought down from their high abode”. Trevet comments that Boethius uses Platonic language (‘more Platonico loquitur’), and continues that “although Plato had a ‘sanus intellectus’, one should not think that souls are created in heaven and from thence lapse into bodies, as Plato seems (‘uidetur’) to have said and others following him such as Macrobius”.⁵⁵ Trevet then proposes the following reading: ‘high abode’ must be understood as a thing’s potential being before it becomes actualised. “Hence, because matter occupies the lowest place in the hierarchy of being, those things which are potentially in matter are produced by the lowest seat (namely matter), but those things which are not potentially in matter but solely in the potency of God the creator who is the highest [being], are said to be produced by the highest seat.”⁵⁶ It is precisely the twisted nature of this interpretation that shows Trevet to be faithful to his belief that Boethius was orthodox with regard to the creation of the souls.

Usually, Trevet takes a different line of interpretation. In book 3 metre 9 Boethius speaks about souls and their light chariots fitting their heavenly nature. By the soul’s sublime nature Trevet understands the soul’s reason, “for it is through reason that man reaches to the sublime heights”.⁵⁷ The light chariot is interpreted as the soul’s immortal power, by means of which, when the body has been dissolved, the soul flies out from it. Alternatively, it can mean “the cultivation of devotion and justice, by reason of which the soul is carried up to heaven after the dissolution of the body”. Boethius’s next verse about God who disperses the souls in the heavens and on earth should not be understood, according to Trevet, “as some Platonists say, as meaning that God created souls and sowed them in the universe by assigning them to stars matched with them, from which they subsequently slip into bodies. But they are said to be sown on the face of heaven because of the power acquired from heaven, from which the union of soul with body derives its period”. In other words, although the soul is created in the body by God, nevertheless its combination with the various arrangements of corporeal substances depends on heavenly power. Trevet – like William, on whom he may have drawn here – offered a solution that involved interpreting the soul’s heavenly home and its companion star in terms of the

⁵⁵ Ed. Silk, 355-356.

⁵⁶ “unde quod dicit Boecius *Hic celsa sede petitos* sic est intelligendum quod sedes rei dicitur potencia in qua est res antequam procedat in esse. Unde quia materia in genere encium est infimum, illa que sunt in potencia materie producuntur ab ima sede, sed illa que non sunt in aliqua potencia materie sed solum in potencia facientis scilicet Dei qui est celsissimus dicuntur produci a celsa sede” (ed. Silk, 356).

⁵⁷ Ed. Silk in Minnis (ed.), 50-51; transl. Scott, 75-76.

mediating influence of the stars on the union of soul and body and the duration of that union.

It is interesting to see Trevet explaining Boethius’s clear reference to the soul’s *pre*-existence in terms of its *post*-existence (if I may coin a phrase), that is, its life after its embodiment on earth: the light chariot is interpreted as the soul’s immortal power or as the cultivation of devotion for a person’s soul after the death of that person. This hermeneutic strategy, however, is a risky business, for the fact that a soul can live a disembodied life after its life on earth makes it impossible to argue against its pre-existence on physiological grounds.

Trevet also invokes the notion of the disembodied soul at those places where Boethius speaks about knowledge as recollection. Drawing on Thomistic teaching of the ‘anima disiuncta’, he explains Boethius’s phrase that the soul is ‘forgetful’ (‘immemor’) as referring to knowledge the soul would have had when separated from the body.⁵⁸ It would then know things only in a confused way. The soul has a certain perfection when united to the body, because without bodily sensation it cannot gain any knowledge. But when separated from the body, the soul *also* has a certain perfection because in this case it does not suffer any hindrance from the body and “therefore its power is more unified”. Despite this latter sort of perfection, the mode of knowing in the disembodied state is said to be ‘confusa’, for in this condition the soul cannot know things individually (since it lacks the body’s sensory experience of things) but only universally.

The same approach is followed by Trevet in his commentary on book 5 metre 3 where Boethius also refers to the Platonic teaching on the soul (“the soul is not totally forgetful of itself (...”). Echoing Aquinas again, Trevet writes that, as the soul has a twofold being – connected to the body and separated from it – it has a corresponding twofold way of knowing. In the embodied state, the soul must have recourse to phantasms; in the disembodied state, the soul receives forms from God by which it attains knowledge. The disembodied state is less natural and less perfect than the embodied state; yet in another way it comes prior to it, because in this state the soul is ‘forma immaterialis’,⁵⁹ not the ‘forma corporis’, and hence knowledge is not dependent on the bodily senses. Having presupposed these things, Trevet writes, one can construe the literal sense accordingly.⁶⁰ At

⁵⁸ Ed. Silk in Minnis (ed.), 53-54; transl. Scott, 79-81.

⁵⁹ Silk has ‘materialis’, but this must be a mistake. Laon, Bibl. mun. 441 (an early copy, not used by Silk) has ‘immaterialis’ (f. 137^r).

⁶⁰ “(...) Est eciam ulterius sciendum, quod iste modus cognoscendi sit anime minus naturalis quam modus cognoscendi in corpore, sicut et esse. Tamen iste modus aliquantulum conuenit ei per prius, quia quod conuenit alicui secundum se per prius conuenit ei quam quod conuenit ei per aliud uel ex alio sed iste modus cognoscendi quem habet separata conuenit ei secundum se

the end of this passage, Trevet must admit, however, that those who take Boethius here to treat of souls as descending into bodies and losing their knowledge on account of their embodiment have the ‘littera’ on their side, and yet the ‘sententia’ will be false.⁶¹

A last example is Trevet’s interpretation of book 5 metre 4, where Boethius speaks about the sleeping soul in the body. Again, Trevet attempts to give this ‘sententia Platonica’ a sound reading (‘ad sanum intellectum’) with recourse to Thomistic-Aristotelian terminology. The Platonic innate knowledge of first principles must be interpreted as the capacity of the passive soul to receive the intelligible forms with the aid of the agent intellect. However, the cognitive process cannot start by itself and needs the phantasms from the sensitive cognition. That is the meaning of the Platonic expression ‘the sleeping soul’ in the body and Boethius’s words that “the mind’s wakened power, calling upon these forms it holds within to similar motions, applies them to the marks received from without and joins those images to the forms hidden within” (*Consolatio*, book 5 metre 4, lines 35-40). “Having seen these things”, Trevet concludes, “the literal sense is clear”.⁶²

These examples clearly show that Trevet was not hostile to Boethius’s Platonism. He tried to do justice to the Platonic inspirations of Boethius, making ample use of the *Timaeus* and Macrobius’s *In somnium Scipionis* in order to clarify the literal sense of the *Consolatio*. And where the literal sense seems to be at odds with Christian doctrine, he attempted to give it an acceptable reading using the philosophical vocabulary of his day. It is therefore not at all surprising that his commentary became a best-seller and by far the most widely read commentary on Boethius in the Middle Ages.

ipsam in quantum est forma materialis. Sed alius modus conuenit ei in quantum est forma corporis et existens in corpore. Et hiis suppositis expone litteram sic” (ed. Silk, 712-713).

⁶¹ “Quidam uero exponentes Boecium dicunt eum locutum more quorundam Platoniorum ponentium animas creatas in celo et haberi perfectam cognitionem omnium et eam per lapsum ad corpora obliuisci sed reduci per excitationem sensuum, quod uidetur insinuari in Menone Platonis (...). Si autem sic exponatur planior erit littera sed falsa sententia” (ed. Silk, 715).

⁶² “Et hoc quidem ad sanum intellectum trahi potest sic ut intelligamus species rerum naturaliter inditas anime in quantum omnes species ad quas intellectus possibilis est in potencia uirtute continentur in intellectu agente. Sed quia tale esse speciei non sufficit ad hoc quod anima actu intelligit, ideo dicitur *sopita* esse. Et quia per mutationem sensus causatur fantasma per quod determinatur lumen intellectus agentis ad abstrahendum determinatam speciem intelligibilem, ideo dicitur quod precedit intellectum aliqua passio uel immutatio sensus per quam intellectus excitetur. Et quia abstracta specie intelligibile non fit intellectio nisi per conuersionem ad fantasma, ideo dicitur quod speciem intellectus reconditam, que est species intelligibilis abstracta, applicat uoci exteriori uel imagini per quam intelligitur fantasma. Hiis uisus plana est littera” (ed. Silk, 758-759).

6. *William of Aragon and the ‘Crimina Platonicorum’*

William of Aragon took a different line from William of Conches and Nicholas Trevet. In his commentary from the late thirteenth century he tried to play down Boethius’s intellectual allegiance to Platonism.⁶³ At the end of his exposition of book 3 metre 9 he even suggests that his reading renders “the literal sense (‘littera’) sufficiently clear and its deeper meaning (‘sententia’) not obscure, for we should not impute to Boethius the crimes of the Platonists, since he knew Aristotle very well”.⁶⁴ Not surprisingly, a wide range of Aristotle’s works is drawn upon. But this does not necessarily mean that he is hostile to Plato, as Courcelle and others have claimed solely on the basis of this exclamation.⁶⁵ A careful reading of the entire commentary, which has hitherto been difficult in the absence of an edition of the entire text, makes it clear that William of Aragon tries to exculpate Boethius, as well as his source, by interpreting them in Aristotelian terms. But at the end of the thirteenth century, when William of Moerbeke’s translation of Proclus’s *Elementatio theologica* had appeared and the *Liber de causis* exercised considerable influence on scholastic thinkers, this often

⁶³ I am extremely grateful to Carmen Olmedilla Herrero for sending me a copy of her unpublished *Edición crítica de los comentarios de Guillermo de Aragón al De consolacione Philosophiae de Boecio*, tesis doctoral, Madrid, Universidad Complutense 1997, which will eventually be published in the series *Corpus Christianorum*. This edition is based on all the known MSS (5), and is therefore far superior to C. I. Terbille’s partial edition which was based on only one MS (*William of Aragon’s commentary on Boethius’ De consolacione Philosophiae*, diss. Michigan 1972, 2 vols). My quotations come from Olmedilla Herrero’s edition (page numbers will be different in the published version of course), but because William’s text has so far been known to scholars in Terbille’s edition, I also give references, if available, to his work. On William see also *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100 - c.1375. The Commentary Tradition*, ed. A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott, with the assistance of D. Wallace, rev. ed. Oxford 1991 (1988¹), 315-316, 318-321 and 328-336. It is now commonly accepted that the commentary dates from the late thirteenth century (before 1305), not from 1335 as Courcelle and Terbille held.

⁶⁴ “Ita legendo exclamacionem istam, litera est satis plana et sententia non obscura. Nec imponemus Boecio platonicorum crimina, qui ualde bene Aristotelem intellexit” (ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 190; Terbille, 135).

⁶⁵ Although Courcelle admits that the Erfurt MS, which was the only MS containing William’s commentary that was known to him, is almost unreadable (“presque illisible”), he nevertheless is sure that this work “présente un peu plus d’intérêt que le précédent” (namely the commentary by Pierre de Paris) and that “Guillaume excuse donc Boèce d’avoir écrit la *Consolation* parce qu’il est aussi l’auteur des traductions et commentaires d’Aristote” (*La Consolation de Philosophie*, 321-322). Minnis and I exaggerated the difference between Trevet and William of Aragon on the basis of this claim by William, when we wrote that Trevet’s attitude is “in sharp contrast to that of the arch-Aristotelian commentator William of Aragon” (*More Platonic loquitur*, 32-33).

meant a Platonised Aristotelianism.⁶⁶ It is therefore interesting to notice that this ‘arch-Aristotelian’ regularly quotes from these works or at least refers to them, as well as to Hermes Trismegistus.

Even William of Aragon’s claim about Boethius’s intellectual preference makes it clear that he drew a distinction between Plato and the Platonists. The Platonists are attacked for their crimes (‘crimina’), but Plato himself is mentioned several times in a neutral or moderately favourable sense.⁶⁷ Thus, Lady Philosophy calls Plato “ours” (‘noster Plato’, book 1 prose 3) because, according to William, “he was the first among those philosophers who improved the study of the causes of nature, from the knowledge of which all learning derives”.⁶⁸ In general, William sees Plato through the eyes of Aristotle. He refers to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* books one, twelve and thirteen, from which he derives his contention that Plato spoke about the properties of natural things in terms of the properties and proportions of mathematical things, namely through their numbers and figures or proportions, because the first who philosophised were influenced by the study of mathematics and only later by the study of natural world.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Cf. C. Steel, ‘Das neue Interesse für den Platonismus am Ende des 13. Jahrhunderts’, *Platon in der abendländischen Geistesgeschichte. Neue Forschungen zum Platonismus*, ed. T. Kobusch and B. Mojsisch, Darmstadt 1997, 120-133, esp. 121.

⁶⁷ For example on book 3 metre 5 (a quotation, ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 162); on book 5 prose 4 (the hierarchy of powers of comprehension: “Causam huius optime dedit Plato, sicut in pluribus proporcionibus tangit Proculus (...)”, 332); on book 5 prose 6 where William follows Boethius in defending Plato (348-349). William also relates the traditional anecdote that Socrates wrote a book on the unity of God and that he worshipped only one god, not many, for which reason he was finally put to death by the people of Athens (on book 1 prose 3; ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 38; Terbille, 46).

⁶⁸ “(...) primus fuit inter philosophos qui causas rerum melius ordinavit, ex quarum noticia dependet omnis scientia” (on book 1 prose 3, ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 37-38; Terbille, 46).

⁶⁹ “Circa primum autem aduertendum quod Plato in pluribus locis (...) uolens loqui de proprietatibus rerum naturalium, loquebatur per proprietates et proporciones mathematicorum, scilicet per numeros uel figuras uel proporciones ipsorum, eo quod philosophantes tunc prius erant in mathematicis informati antequam in naturalibus informarentur, et ita per similitudines proporcionum exponebant proprietatum naturas” (on book 3 metre 9, line 10, ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 185-186, Terbille, 129; cf. *Metaphysics* I.6, 987a29 ff.; XII.8, 1073a19 ff.; and XIII.1, 1076a17 ff.). A version of Plato’s maxim ‘Know thyself’ is quoted (on book 1 prose 2, ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 33; Terbille, 40). William even invokes Plato as an authority for his interpretation of the line “das cuncta moueri” (You grant motion to all else, book 3 metre 9, line 3) against those who had criticised Boethius here on the basis of the fact that there are many immobile things (ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 183; Terbille, 125).

6.1. The World Soul and the Descent of Human Souls

In his brief exposition of book 3 metre 9, William of Aragon systematically suppresses the Platonic overtones, a task which is of course not at all easy. Thus, the Platonic ‘light chariots’ are said to be the mobile bodies with which the souls are united.⁷⁰ His interpretation of “the sowing of souls in the heavens and on earth” is similar to Trevet’s: it means that heavenly power, along with the nature of the elements, determines and influences earthly life. The “bounteous law” from the *Consolatio* by which the souls return to God is the natural law, which is explained as the faculty which each soul derives from its natural inclination (‘ex naturali appetitu’), and the “returning fire” is the ‘naturalis delectatio’.⁷¹

There are only a few direct references to Plato. One occurs in his exposition of the threefold nature of the world soul. William brackets Boethius’s phrase “the soul’s threefold nature” (‘triplex natura’) with Plato’s threefold division of souls, as reported in the *Liber de causis* and in Proclus’s *Elementatio theologica*: (1) divine souls or ideas, (2) souls in transition between intellect and non-intellect (‘transmutantes ab intellectu ad non intellectum’) such as the human souls, and (3) intermediate souls, namely the celestial movers, which occupy a place below the first and above the second category of souls. According to William, Boethius says nothing about the first category, “and the reason for this is, I believe, that on this matter he was more dedicated to Aristotle’s view (than that of Plato), who had not posited this kind of soul”.⁷² Boethius’s phrase ‘anima media’ can refer only to the third category – the second category is dealt with in the words ‘animas uitasque minores’. These intermediate souls have a threefold act or working, as is clear from *Liber de causis* and Proclus: an animal nature in their movement, an intellectual nature in their cognition and a divine nature in their causative power. Boethius’s line “You, binding soul together in its threefold nature’s midst, Soul that moves all things, then

⁷⁰ “*adaptans leuibus curribus, id est uniens corporibus mobilibus de loco ad locum*” (ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 188; Terbille, 133).

⁷¹ “*Omnia enim quecumque generantur, hic per celi uirtutem et elementorum naturam generantur. Sol enim, ut dicit Philosophus, et homo hominem generant. Et alia breuiter animalia, uirtute celi et aliarum particularium causarum que sunt in terra. Et ideo dicit eas serere in celum et terram (...)* Et ipse anime secundum facultatem quam habent ex naturali appetitu (...) in summum bonum feruntur. Et hec est lex naturalis et benigna que nos ad deum conuertit. Et ex hac lege causatur ignis dilectionis qui est redux uel reductor noster in deum (...) *igne* id est naturali dilectione” (ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 189; Terbille, 133).

⁷² “*De primo enim genere, quia omnino posuit eas separatas et dixit eas deos esse animaliter Plato, nichil dicit Boecio in hoc loco. Et credo quod fuit causa quia in hoc magis adhesit opinioni Aristotelis, qui tale genus non posuit animarum*” (ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 186; Terbille, 130).

divide it into harmonious parts” is then interpreted as follows: God binds, that is proportions, the soul and divides, that is multiplies, it among the celestial orbs. Knowing that some have interpreted the ‘anima media’ as the world soul, William says that we can accept the world soul as the soul of the first orbit or the power of God which infuses all things, but he concludes that his own interpretation of the ‘anima media’ in terms of the celestial souls moving the heavenly bodies is more consonant with the text of the *Consolatio* and with the teachings of the philosophers.⁷³ This is a strange reading of the threefold nature of the world soul, for Boethius certainly did not mean three kinds of souls.

Another illustration of William’s attempt to bring down the Platonic atmosphere of Boethius’s text to the Aristotelian world of sense is his reading of the line “You bring forth, with the same bases, souls and lesser living beings” (book 3 metre 9, line 18). Some have interpreted this as referring to the souls of good and bad angels (‘calodemones’ and ‘cacodemones’) on the one hand and human souls on the other, but William concludes that Boethius must have meant the souls of men and those of animals and plants: “Because we have no philosophical experience of these other souls, we should not impute this (doctrine) to such a philosopher”.⁷⁴

6.2. Knowledge as Recollection

In the same vein William of Aragon comments on book 3 metre 11, in which Boethius employs the Platonic notion of knowledge as recollection. The ‘profound mind’ stands for the principles from which the soul derives its knowledge. The ‘light of his inward vision’ is the lucid working of the intellect and reason. He finds confirmation for this position in Boethius’s words that “if Plato’s muse rings true, what each man learns, forgetful he recalls”. Without referring to the notion of the soul’s pre-existence, William claims that for Plato recollection is the process of learning which starts with the soul’s first principles, from which knowledge of all things can be

⁷³ “Licet hic breuiter loquatur Philosophia, ordinem tamen et multiplicacionem animarum celestium denotauit. Et illo modo intelligendo intelligere possumus animam esse mundi animam orbis primi aut uirtutem dei, cunctis entibus superfusam, ut quidam exponere uoluerunt, sed quod dictum est magis est consonum textui et eciam dictis philosophorum” (ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 187; Terbille, 131).

⁷⁴ “Non enim de aliis animabus experientia philosophica potest dari, quare non est tali philosopho imponendum” (ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 188, Terbille, 132). One MS (Erfurt, Wissenssch. Bibl., Amplon. F. 358) incorrectly reads “plato” against “philosopho” of the other four MSS. Terbille, using only this MS, had to emend this to “Platoni” (*William of Aragon’s commentary on Boethius*, 132 and n. on 180) in order to make sense of the grammar of the sentence.

derived. Through deduction from these first principles potential knowledge is turned into actual knowledge. “Hence, when we read Boethius in this way, we should not condemn Boethius or Plato.”⁷⁵

William then continues by answering a possible objection to his interpretation: for did not Plato and Boethius consider the body as an impediment to intellectual cognition? As a good Aristotelian, William cannot accept this negative judgement of the body. His brief comment is put in the form of a ‘quaestio’: “Whether the body hinders the light of our intellect, as Plato is reported having said in the *Phaedrus*”. Like Nicholas Trevet, William distinguishes here between the embodied soul and the soul after it has left the body. Because in this life on earth we come to knowledge only through sense perception, the body can be said to hinder the soul’s intellectual cognition after its separation from the body. How a body can hinder the soul after their separation William does not say. He simply concludes that he believes that Plato, when speaking about bodily impediment, referred to the soul’s perfect knowledge after its separation from the body, for in this life the body is a natural companion to the soul and a ‘sine qua non’ for intellectual activities. In view of his reputation as an anti-Platonic Aristotelian, it is remarkable to see William trying to save Plato, without relinquishing his Aristotelian position on sense perception as the ‘sine qua non’ for intellectual cognition.⁷⁶ He does not, however, explain how he thinks the soul can arrive at its perfect knowledge in a life without a body.

William is more forthcoming in his comment on book 5 metre 3: the human soul, which is free from bodily fetters, can reach the divine and knows each thing in both its universal and particular aspects; this state can hardly be attained in this life. On embodiment the soul loses the knowledge of individual things (‘noticia discreta’), possessing only a confused knowledge of the universal. This is the state in which human beings are naturally born.⁷⁷ William’s position is not unlike that of Trevet in specifying the state

⁷⁵ “Intelligebat enim Plato quod quodammodo esset quedam recordacio ipsum addiscere eo quod in uirtute primorum principiorum per se notorum omnia naturaliter cognoscuntur et sunt in quadam propinqua potencia deduccione principiorum ut actualiter cognoscantur, sicut per aliquod principium in recordacionibus hoc contingit. Et ita legendo non oportet in hac sententia reprehendere Boecium nec Platonem” (ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 209).

⁷⁶ “‘Vtrum autem corpus impediat lumen intellectus nostri’, ut dicitur quod Plato dixit in *Phaedrone*. Dicendum breuiter quod quantum ad modum intelligendi quem habebit anima post separacionem a corpore, manifeste impeditur, quia in hac uita nichil intelligimus sine sensu; quantum uero ad modum intelligendi presentem, non impeditur, immo naturaliter adiuuatur (...) Vnde credo quod Plato de perfecta noticia omnium rerum quam anima habebit post separacionem a corpore intellexit, non de noticia huius uite” (ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 209).

⁷⁷ “quod anima humana, in sua summa libertate existens, attingit diuina et alta per intellectum adeptum (...), et ibi circa mentem diuinam se conseruando et informando cognoscit uniuersale et particulare circa quodcumque, lapsa uero ad corpus uel membris sensibilibus alligata habet confusam in uniuersali noticiam perdens in particulari discretam; proculdubio ille modus

of the soul after its life on earth in order to explain Boethius's allusions to the soul's *pre*-existence. But unlike William, Trevet believes that the disembodied soul cannot know things individually but possesses only a confused universal knowledge (see section 5.3 above).

Another example, which illustrates this incoherent position, comes from William's comment on book 5 prose 2, in which Boethius speaks about the degrees of freedom of the soul. William rightly distinguishes between the first state, which is allotted to separated substances (disembodied souls) and the next four states, which are ascribed to human souls. The first category possesses – in the words of Boethius – penetrating judgement, an uncorrupted will and the ability to achieve what they desire. According to William, their knowledge is perfect, because they are not hindered by anything sensible.⁷⁸ This state is followed by the highest state of human souls, which is characterised as contemplation of divine things, beyond the sphere of sensible things. In contrast to Boethius, who clearly alludes to disembodied souls, William means the soul's highest capacity which men can attain “in this life”. But, confusingly, he proceeds to quote Hermes Trismegistus, who clearly speaks about those who are separated from the body.⁷⁹ The next state is formed by people who live virtuously but who are already less occupied with the study of divine things, focusing on sensible, domestic and civil matters. At the next stage people begin to be ruled by their passions, and the last stage is occupied by those who are totally enslaved by them.

Thus William interprets the spatial character of the descent, by which the soul becomes less free, in terms of an ever increasing dependence on the body. The terminology of ‘descendere’, ‘cadere’ and ‘labi’ is adopted but stripped of its Platonic overtones. William of Aragon simply writes that his comment as well as Boethius's own words show that those who have argued that Boethius is speaking here about a descent of the soul have misunderstood the text.⁸⁰

cognoscendi nascitur nobiscum, ut in prohemio Phisicorum habetur, primum uero uix acquiritur ante mortem” (ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 323).

⁷⁸ “Est enim in ipsis iudicium perspicax, cum enim earum intellectus nullo impediatur sensibili sed perfecte rem cum suis circumstanciis comprehendat, perfecte inspicit, intelligit et iudicat (...)” (ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 309-310; Terbille, 144).

⁷⁹ “(...) prima et maxima est earum libertas quando contemplando diuina super omnes uires sensibiles et omnia sensibilia eleuantur. Et in hoc gradu omnes philosophi appellauerunt intellectum humanum adeptum eo quod eleuatus a sensibilibus in quibus turbatus perditur, adipiscitur semet ipsum ut in proprium opus potens perfecte ut est possibile in hac uita. Vnde Hermes Tremegistus ait: ‘Deum deorum nemo perfecte cognoscit, sed uix mente potest attingi ab hiis qui per longum studium a corpore separantur’. Isti sunt quasi dii (...)” (ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 310; Terbille, 144-145).

⁸⁰ “(...) satis patet ex hiis que sentenciando sunt dicta et eciam ex hiis que ipsemet pro expositione subiunxit in textu” (ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 312; Terbille, 147). Another point of criti-

Thus like William of Conches and Nicholas Trevet, William of Aragon interprets the descent in terms of an ever closer dependence of the soul on the body. Though in many of its details their interpretations agree, their motivations are different. William of Aragon did not really believe that Boethius needed to be rescued from heterodox Platonism, for at root Boethius was a follower of Aristotle, and even at the level of words Boethius was no Platonist.

7. *From Medieval to Humanist Commentaries: Badius Ascensius*

One would perhaps expect that humanist readers of the *Consolatio* worried less about the heterodox, Platonic elements of the *Consolatio* than their medieval predecessors. They were often school teachers, focusing on points of grammar and style. They could leave the weightier philosophical questions aside, and often did so. Since books were hardly read from cover to cover, it must have been easy to skip the difficult or controversial parts. Even so, one may surmise that the enhanced knowledge of the world of antiquity made it easier for humanists to understand why Boethius had used Platonic terms and had accepted the philosophy behind it without thereby becoming an heretic.

While it is true that in the grammar schools of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Boethius was primarily read for his Latin and his moral commonplaces rather than for his philosophy in its more strict sense, this does not mean that the question of Boethius’s intellectual allegiances became less pressing. I will discuss two important commentators from this period to show how they coped with this question.

First published in 1498, Badius Ascensius’s commentary enjoyed a great popularity in the following decades, running into at least twenty-nine editions.⁸¹ It was printed together with Pseudo-Thomas’s commentary, but it

cism receives a less evasive answer: according to some Boethius was wrong in speaking about reason in separated substances, since reason is discursive, and as such cannot be found in those substances. William replies that by ‘reason’ Boethius means the act of reason, that is, the act of the intellect, which is common to human beings and separated substances: “Racio enim non significat discursus, sed ratum actum, id est intellectus actum, et ille in hominibus et separatis substanciis reperitur, sed in hominibus cum discursu uniuersalium ad particularia uel intelligibilium ad sensibilia uel huiusmodi, in illis autem sine discursu (...)” (ed. Olmedilla Herrero, 312; Terbille, 146).

⁸¹ See Ph. Renouard, *Bibliographie des impressions et des œuvres de Josse Badius Ascensius, imprimeur et humaniste 1462-1535*, 3 vols, Paris 1908, vol. 1, 46, and 2, 196-216. For Badius Ascensius’s work, *Duplex commentatio ex integro reposita atque recognita in Boetium de consolatione philosophica et de disciplina scolastica*, I have used the Lyons edition from 1511 (Renouard, no. 19), occasionally slightly altering the punctuation. There is no good study of Badius Ascensius’s commentary on the *Consolatio*. For some brief remarks see P. G.

had a much different focus. Badius Ascensius wrote for the schoolboys, the ‘aetas imbecillior’, who had to learn good Latin. Hence, his explanations mainly concern points of grammar, style and vocabulary. Courcelle considered this change as proof that, after a long barren period of scholastic commentaries, the beauty of Boethius’s style began to be recognised and appreciated again. According to him, Badius Ascensius discarded the medieval ‘interpretatio christiana’, and looked down on the work of his predecessors. As Courcelle writes: “D’une façon générale, Josse Bade ne consent aux digressions philosophiques que pour réfuter l’interprétation du pseudo-Thomas” – a judgement which is repeated by Anthony Grafton.⁸² Here Courcelle seems to have read too much of his own prejudices into Badius Ascensius’s work. Badius Ascensius often speaks with respect of Pseudo-Thomas, and consciously limits himself to adding grammatical explanations.⁸³ Likewise, his own comments on the Platonist passages (which can hardly be called digressions) do not show that he was hostile to the work of his predecessor.

In his brief comment on book 3 metre 9 Badius Ascensius writes on the threefold nature of the world soul that although the Pseudo-Thomas commentary has paid sufficient attention to its philosophical aspect,⁸⁴ he will add a few things from Macrobius’s *In somnium Scipionis*, namely where Macrobius relates three opinions about the division of the universe. Without going into details, it may be said that Badius Ascensius’s attempt to apply the second opinion related by Macrobius to the threefold nature of the

Schmidt, ‘Jodocus Badius Ascensius als Kommentator’, *Der Kommentar in der Renaissance*, ed. A. Buck and O. Herding, Boppard 1975, 63-71, and Nauta, ‘Boethius in the Renaissance’, forthcoming.

⁸² *La Consolation de Philosophie*, 332; Grafton, ‘Boethius in the Renaissance’, 410-415, esp. 413: Badius Ascensius “had composed a running gloss to the *Consolatio* that drew on the proper ancient and humanist sources to refute Ps.-Aquinas point by point”.

⁸³ “Omnia autem satis exposita sunt in commentariis superioribus que si sancte Thome sunt nescio cur adiectum sit hec Marquardus. Pauca tamen grammaticalia addam”, on book 1 metre 2. Cf. on book 1 prose 4: “Nos autem non theologicas sed grammaticas recepimus inuestigationes”, and on book 1 prose 5: “hec quia grammaticorum partes excedunt missa facio”. At the end of his commentary he writes that “hec sunt que (...) Boetii consolationem habui explananda. In quibus grammatici munus [?; minus ed.] gessi, quia philosophicum reliquum commentarium inveni”. Further, in his prohemium he refers to Pseudo-Thomas for the reasons why Boethius composed the *Consolatio* in prose and metre (“cuius rationem in commentarii sequentibus sancti Thome audies, et statim ubi de decoro loquimur a nobis quoque accipies”). He even praises the commentary in the following terms: “(...) sed cuiuscumque ea sunt auctoris certe non contemnenda putem, cum multa sane utilia dilucide dicant, grammaticae quidem et poetices cultoris experientia” (letter to Stephanus Geynardus, printed in the first edition of his Boethius commentary, Lyons 1498, and quoted in Renouard, *Bibliographie des impressions*, vol. 2, 197).

⁸⁴ “quamuis in superioribus commentis satis philosophatum sit”.

world soul is wide of the mark.⁸⁵ Macrobius writes that this second group preferred to divide the universe into three successions of the four elements, and that the soul, when it was despatched to a body, descended from the Elysian fields through these three ranks of the elements to the body. But this has nothing to do with the threefold nature of the world soul. Badius Ascensius is then faced with Boethius’s reference to the *two* circles in the next line (namely the ecliptic and the celestial equator). For an explanation, he now draws on the third opinion related by Macrobius: this group of Platonists divided the universe into two parts, the fixed sphere and the seven so-called errant spheres (including the earth). This of course fits Boethius’s text and its source the *Timaeus* (34c ff.) much better. Badius Ascensius’s conclusion about the world soul is therefore vague: on the one hand the world soul is located at a fixed position between the fixed sphere and the ‘errant sphere’ (including the earth) according to the third opinion; on the other hand it runs through the entire cosmos according to the second opinion of the Platonists.⁸⁶

He then defends Pseudo-Thomas by removing a possible misunderstanding of the latter’s words on the creation of the souls: when Pseudo-Thomas writes that souls are created daily in order to be infused into bodies, this should not be understood as meaning that they are created first and then unite with bodies. Badius Ascensius refers to Augustine, but leaves the question to theologians for discussion. Boethius’s ‘returning fire’ was glossed by Pseudo-Thomas as ‘charitas’, which is not absurd, Badius Ascensius writes, because it is only charity which can lead us to heaven. But because all the other things (in this metre) are couched in Platonic terms, this too can be understood in a Platonic way, and Badius Ascensius then proceeds to quote Vergil’s famous lines “Principio caelum ac terras camposque liquentes (...)” as a parallel.⁸⁷

Badius Ascensius’s commentary on book 3 metre 9 is brief, passing over the reference to the pre-existence of soul. In his comment on book 3 metre

⁸⁵ Courcelle would not have spoken about “une citation pertinente” (*La Consolation de Philosophie*, 332) had he identified the place in Macrobius’s text and considered its context. The quotation comes from I.11 (my paraphrase is indebted to W. H. Stahl’s translation, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio by Macrobius*, New York 1952, 132-133).

⁸⁶ “uidetur ergo Boetius hos secutus animam mundi inter duas iam dictas partes mediam dicere, sed secundum secundam opinionem Platoniorum omnia inter se glomerari”.

⁸⁷ “Quod autem in commentario dicitur quod anime quotidie creantur, quibus creatis infunduntur corporibus, non debet intelligi quod prius creantur quam infundantur, quia secundum Augustinum creando infunduntur et infundendo creantur, nec de potentia materie educuntur, aut ex traduce. Sed hec theologi disquirant. *Reduci igne*, i.e. inquit commentarius, charitate, quod non absurdum est, quia cum singula uitia infernum mereantur, sola charitas in celum ducit. Sed quia cetera Platonice dicta sunt, potest et hoc Platonice intelligi ut auctor sub aliis uerbis dicat quod Virgilius lib. VI. Eneide sic dicit: ‘Principio (...)’”. Cf. *Aeneid* 6.724-32.

11 he expresses some reservations about Boethius's adherence to the Platonic doctrine of knowledge as recollection in book 3 metre 11 ("if Plato's Muse rings true, what each man learns, forgetful he recalls"), suggesting that Boethius does not say that Plato spoke the truth. The very wording of 'Platonis musa' already suggests that we must look for a different understanding of these words. Badius Ascensius proceeds to give the traditional explanation in terms of the soul's innate first principles from which potential knowledge can be actualised. Faced with Boethius's words "I strongly agree with Plato" at the beginning of the next section (book 3 prose 12), his answer is basically that Boethius did not accept Plato's argument in its entirety ('totum illud dictum Platonis') but only something similar: namely that knowledge is based on first principles that are innate. Boethius's purpose was only to point out that by the weight of grief men could lose their knowledge of things which they had known previously.⁸⁸

A similar approach is adopted in his comment on book 1 prose 5. Having mentioned the Platonic doctrine of the pre-existence of the souls, Badius Ascensius comments that this is not what Boethius, who knew Augustine's refutation of this idea, had in mind. The soul however can be said to have a heavenly origin, because God in heaven is its creator. Boethius does not say that the soul is created in heaven but only that this is its native country.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ "*Quod si Platonis musa* i.e. diuina inuentio et benedicendi copia, *personat uerum*. Non dicit uerum esse quod Platonem dixisse. Etiam Aristoteles asserit quod uestrum uidelicet addiscere non esset nisi quoddam reminisci. *Sed si uerum*, inquit, *personat musa* quasi diceret poeticum, inuitat ad aliud intelligendum per hoc licentiose dictum. Et ita philosophia non accedit opinioni nisi quantum ad hoc quod anima rationalis habeat in se quedam principia sciendi per que ad scientiam in actu tanquam a prius notis in principiis ad nota iam actu ueniat. Nihil hic obscurum est". On book 3 prose 12: "*Tum ego* etc. Queri potest quomodo Boetius philosophia non refragante dicat se assentire Platoni et eius dicto quod nostrum discere [dicere *ed.*] non fit nisi quoddam reminisci (...) Dicens Boetius non totum illud dictum Platonis sed quoddam simile in se repertum approbare. Cum enim quedam prius sciret et eorum postea obliuisceretur iterumque per philosophiam ad oblitorum cognitionem redire coactus est sentire que illa apprehensio non esset nisi quedam reminiscentia prius cognitorum; hoc autem totum fingit ut ostendat hominem per merorem in obliuionem cadere".

⁸⁹ "Sed hic Boetio non congruit qui quod Augustinus dicit nouit animam non prius creatam fuisse in celo quam corpori infunderetur sed simul et creando infusam et infundendo creatam. Verumtamen quia anime rationalis pater deus est ipsaque potissima pars hominis, ideo potest intelligi de celo loqui. Non enim dicit animam hortam, hoc est creatam, in celo sed oriundam de celo, quia a deo patre qui in celis est originem traxit, cum a deo – non a patre terreno – cum corpore generetur. Sed hec quia grammaticorum partes excedunt missa facio". Cf. his comments on book 3 metre 6, line 5 ("Hic clausit membris animos celsa sede petitos"): "(...) est platoniorum dogma ut docet Macrobius in De Somno Scipionis, sed a catholica veritate abhorrens. Dicit enim diuus Augustinus quod anima creando infunditur et infundendo creatur. Sed si uelimus pie intelligere nihil esset hic in auctore nostro impium. Non enim dicit animos dimissos esse a celsa sede, sed petitos ab eo qui in suprema residet sede, hoc est a deo; quod uerum est. Cum etenim animas brutorum cum corporibus nasci et perire uoluit, animos humanos ipse solus creat. Et ita petendi sunt a celesti potestate. Bene autem dicit 'animos' quia

It is not easy to draw a straightforward conclusion from Badius Ascensius’s scattered remarks on Boethius’s Platonism. It looks rather as if he had a superficial and amateurish approach to the philosophical aspects of the text. On the one hand, he does not seem to have doubts about Boethius’s orthodoxy, on the other he sometimes underscores the Platonic background of Boethius’s formulations by quoting parallel passages from Vergil and Macrobius, who described the transmigrations of souls through the spheres in great detail.

8. Johannes Murmellius’s Humanist Commentary

The commentary by the Dutch scholar, Johannes Murmellius, was published only sixteen years later than that of Badius Ascensius, namely in 1514, but bears even more clearly the stamp of the work of a humanistic grammar teacher. Like Badius Ascensius, he focuses on the grammar, style and terminology of Boethius, and he shows a critical attitude to the transmission of the text, which sometimes leads to emendations. His range of quotations is wider than that of Badius Ascensius, and these quotations often serve to underline the high moral-proverbial value of the *Consolatio*. Thus, far from functioning solely as literary adornments, these quotations helped to give the *Consolatio* its place in a wider network of edifying works, which comprise not only pagan but also Christian literature (including the Bible), ancient as well as modern. They were the vehicles by which classical literature was delivered to youth, and they helped to convey the idea of the compatibility of the moral sayings in all these different works.⁹⁰

The belief in this compatibility is also reflected in Murmellius’s reluctance to express strong opinions about Boethius’s Platonism vis-à-vis his Christianity. He himself calls Plato’s *Timaeus* a “very beautiful book” and a “very noble dialogue”, and he notes that “‘O qui perpetua’, by far the most beautiful and erudite poem, is almost exclusively derived from Plato’s *Timaeus* by Boethius’s admirable genius”.⁹¹ His commentary on these verses consists for a large part of long quotations from the *Timaeus* in the

animus secundum Iuvenalem solius hominis est, anima autem etiam brutorum (...)”, and he then proceeds to quote Juvenal’s *Satire* 15, 142-149.

⁹⁰ For fuller discussions of these points see L. Nauta, ‘A Humanist Reading of Boethius’s *Consolatio Philosophiae*: The Commentary by Murmellius and Agricola (1514)’, *Between Demonstration and Imagination. Essays in the History of Science and Philosophy Presented to John D. North*, ed. L. Nauta and A. Vanderjagt, Leiden 1999, 313-338. I quote from the reprint of Murmellius’s commentary in PL 63, 878-1074.

⁹¹ PL 63, 1025: “Carmen autem hoc multo pulcherrimum eruditissimumque ex Platonis fere Timaeo mirabili ingenio depromptum est”; cf. 891D.

translation of Ficino (he quotes regularly from Ficino's works). At one point he addresses the reader saying that, although Plato's opinions on the world soul and on souls of lesser beings are not approved by all Christians, "Boethian Philosophy follows Plato carefully and prudently", and that in turn he, Murmellius, "will expound carefully the elements of Platonic doctrine". Murmellius then gives a brief catalogue of opinions on the question whether heavenly bodies are animated, which must confirm the same point, namely that Christian faith is neutral on this issue: witness the positions of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.⁹²

Only in book 3 metre 11 does he criticise the Platonic doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul as "vanissimum"; Plato is said to have used "summa et incredibili⁹³ eloquentia" when he spoke about the notion of knowledge as recollection, and the authority of Augustine ("omnium mortalium longe doctissimus") is invoked, though not quoted, to refute this "Platonicum dogma".⁹⁴ The notion of recollection of knowledge is explained along traditional lines: the soul would have known all the things it could possibly know, if the body had not weighed it down.⁹⁵ And the Boethian 'seed of truth', remaining in the soul after embodiment, is described as a certain principle and starting point, from which man is suited to perceive truth and acquire knowledge.⁹⁶ Yet, it is clear from the ample quotations from Plato and Platonic authors such as Ficino, as well as from

⁹² PL 63, 1029CD: "Lectorem hoc loco, antequam ad alia progrediar enarranda, velim admonitum, Boethianam in hoc carmine Philosophiam, non solum diligenter, verum et caute Platonem imitari; cujus opiniones de anima mundi caeterisque, hominum puta, et pecudum, et arborum, non usquequaque Christianis hominibus probantur, tametsi nos Latinis fere singula ex Platonis doctrina non indiligenter exposuerimus. Porro coelestes sphaeras habere animas, non modo Platonici, sed omnes etiam Peripatetici confitentur (...). Augustinus and Thomas "tradunt nihil (quantum ad Christianam doctrinam spectat) interesse, coelestia corpora animas habere, vel non habere". His catalogue of opinions is indebted to Paulo Cortesi's Commentary on the *Sentences*, Book 2, dist. 4, which he quotes (1030A).

⁹³ PL 63, 1037AB; 'incredibili' may simply mean here unusual, extraordinary and hard to believe (because Plato often spoke in fables about divine and metaphysical matters).

⁹⁴ PL 63, 1036-1037 (the quotation on Augustine is on 1024C). I cannot therefore agree with F. D'Elia, 'Il commento di Giovanni Murmellius al carne Boeziano *O qui perpetua*', *Miscellanea Francescana* 83 (1983), 450-454 (a brief note on book 3 metre 9), who suggested (without much evidence) that Murmellius "[s]equendo questa precisa linea ermeneutica di convergenza del carne boeziano (that is, book 3 metre 9) con la dottrina biblico-patristica (...) è indotto a minimizzare la concezione dell'anima del mondo e della preesistenza delle anime" (453).

⁹⁵ "Gravitatem perturbationum et oblivionem, non eorum quae quis in alia vita novit (nam homini antequam nasceretur, aliam vitam fuisse sentire vanissimum est), sed eorum quae apta esset suapte natura (nisi corpori infunderetur, conjugereturque) anima cognoscere" (1036B), followed by Sap. 1.9, which was often quoted at this place by commentators on Boethius. Cf. the discussion of William of Conches's commentary in section 4.2 above.

⁹⁶ PL 63, 1036C: "Principium et inchoatio quaedam qua est homo veritati percipiendae et acquirendae scientiae naturaliter aptus".

the non-committal way in which they are often presented, that Murmellius considers his role as commentator primarily to consist in clarifying philological points and providing sources (from which moral lessons could be drawn) rather than in giving verdicts on the doctrinal soundness of the opinions expressed in the text. Thus, in his comments on book 5 prose 2 where Boethius alludes to the pre-existence of souls, Murmellius simply writes that this is taken from Plato, without trying to give it a Christian reading, and the same is true for his comments on other such passages (for example on book 5 prose 3).

Thus, there is no attempt to give a Christian interpretation to the overtly Platonic passages. Murmellius regularly points to the Platonic source of Boethius’s teachings or formulae when he writes “ex Platonis doctrina”, “ut Platoni placet” and “ut Platoni visum est”. But he is far from suggesting that this Platonic teaching is antithetical to Christian thought.

9. *The Seventeenth Century: Platonism Exposed and Embraced*

The *Consolatio* remained widely read in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It falls outside the scope of this article to deal with the commentaries from this period in any detail, but a few general points should be mentioned here. The humanist type of commentary, which I have illustrated with the works of Badius Ascensius and Murmellius, is represented by the editions-cum-notes of Johannes Bernartius, Theodorus Sitzmannus, Petrus Bertius and, especially, Rhenanus Vallinus. They often mention Boethius’s predilection for the Platonists, and offer many parallels to the Platonic doctrines of the *Consolatio*.⁹⁷ In fact, their commentaries, especially that of Vallinus, are concatenations of long quotations from a great number of Greek and Latin authors, which make it difficult to discern their own preferences. Apparently, the need to rescue Boethius from pagan Platonism was no longer so urgent. Occasionally, a critical note is struck, for instance, when Sitzmannus admonishes the reader to peruse Arnobius’s *Adversus nationes* “from which it can be learnt that the Platonic dogma (namely on knowledge as recollection) is not without absurdity”,⁹⁸ but in general

⁹⁷ The notes by Vallinus, Sitzmannus, Bernartius, and Pierre Cally are conveniently assembled in the editio Hackiana of the *Consolatio*, Leiden 1671, reprinted in the editio Vulpiana, A. J. Valpy, London 1823, 421-558. On Boethius’s Platonism see Vallinus: “Nihil enim hoc toto opere aliud fere Boethius quam *platonizeŕi*” (editio Vulpiana, 427); “Academicis, iis scilicet, quae ex Platonis Platoniorumque libris hauserat, quibus addictissimus fuit” (429). Sitzmannus writes: “Platonicis quibus Boethius fuit addictissimus” (428).

⁹⁸ Editio Vulpiana, 515-516.

Boethius's Platonism is taken for granted without any criticism and its sources quoted in a neutral, non-committal way.

One of the most interesting excursions into Platonic philosophy is offered by Vallinus in his comment on the 'light chariots' ('leues currus') of the souls (book 3 metre 9, line 19). He interprets them as the souls' astral bodies, quoting Proclus's words that souls are created in the supercelestial or intelligible world by God, and receive a body on their descent to an earthly body. This astral body is made of the same, very fine and lucent stuff from which the stars are also composed. Just as animal spirits, made from the most pure and fine parts of blood, function in a terrestrial body as vehicles of the soul for diffusing it through all parts of the body, so this ethereal and celestial body of the soul, inasmuch as it is rational and intellectual, is an apt vehicle of the soul, and helps it to attain knowledge of the divine. Being both a corporeal body (yet of the finest nature) and of heavenly origin, this astral body, Vallinus concludes, is a link between the terrestrial body and the incorporeal soul.⁹⁹ Not did only Platonic philosophers hold this dogma, but also many Christians endorsed it in the first centuries of our era. He then tries to save Boethius from having endorsed such an "opinio a veritate Christiana abhorrens". It would be amazing if this doctrine, which is so contrary to the Christian doctrine, would have influenced Christian thinkers and especially the "Catholic philosophy of Boethius", were it not for the fact that only at the fifth synod, that is, many years after the death of Boethius, was it condemned alongside other errors of Origen (that is, at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553; but there had been earlier condemnations, which Vallinus does not mention). Alternatively, Boethius might simply have meant, following Themistius's interpretation of Plato's

⁹⁹ "Corpus illud seu quasi corpus aetherium, coeleste esse, ejusdem cum astris substantiae Platonici existimabant, animaeque in inferiora labenti adhibebant, ut esset non solum quod animaret anima, [cui semper adesse oporteat corpus quod animet] sed quemadmodum animae, qua animalis est, spiritus ille, qui est e puriori tenuiorique sanguinis substantia, pro vehiculo est, quo illa in omnes corporis partes diffunditur. Sic animae, qua rationalis intellectualisque est, in haec inferiora labenti, adesse corpus illud, seu quasi corpus, coeleste seu aetherium volebant: quod tenuissimum cum sit, recte simplicissimae animae vehiculum esse perhiberetur; quo illa comite in Dei substantiarumque intelligibilium cognitionem tolleretur" (Leiden, apud Fr. Hackium 1656, 61-62 of the 'Notae' = editio Vulpiana, 508-509). In his Boethian commentary Murellius too had clarified the Platonic doctrine (PL 63, 1028-1030) by equating the 'vehicula' with 'aethera corpora' and quoting Ficino's Platonic commentary, but it is doubtful whether Murellius was thinking of such celestial bodies or 'airy envelopes'. For Cally's interpretation see L. Nauta, 'Platonic and Cartesian Philosophy in the Commentary on Boethius' *Consolatio Philosophiae* by Pierre Cally', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 4 (1996), 79-100, esp. 98-99. On the astral body see D. P. Walker, 'The Astral Body in Renaissance Medicine', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 21 (1958), 119-133, reprinted in his *Music, Spirit and Language in the Renaissance*, ed. P. Gouk, London 1985.

words, that the vehicle was nothing other than the soul’s ‘ingenium’.¹⁰⁰ Vallinus must have been one of the first who interpreted this verse correctly in terms of astral bodies.¹⁰¹

Although he delved deeply into the Platonic sources of the *Consolatio*, Vallinus remained neutral in his presentation. But there were others in the seventeenth century who embraced wholeheartedly Boethius’s Platonism, including the belief in the pre-existence of the soul. We have the testimony of Leibniz, who himself had made an abbreviation of at least books one and two of the *Consolatio* for his own use,¹⁰² that the presence of the doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul was the very reason why his good friend Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont was greatly attracted to the *Consolatio*: “Mr. Helmont had special affection for this book because he believes he can find traces of Pythagorean ideas in it”.¹⁰³ Leibniz was much impressed by Boethius’s argument that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, the world is controlled and ruled by providence, that is, a sovereign intelligence: “(...) it must be said that the author says some very beautiful and sensible things about the order of the universe (...) [W]e now only see a small portion of the infinite universe, and because our present life is only a little portion of what will happen to us, we should not be astonished if all the beauty of things does not reveal itself at first sight. But we will discover it more and more (...).” It has been argued that these observations suggest “that Leibniz is steadily moving towards Van Helmont’s view that individuals will experience many different incarnations until they eventually reach a state of perfection”.¹⁰⁴ This however was certainly not

¹⁰⁰ “Quam Platonis opinionem a veritate Christiana abhorrentem mirum esset eos e Christi schola doctos viros, imprimisque Catholicam Boetii philosophiam attigisse, nisi eam V. tantum Synodo ab Ecclesia cum aliis Origenis erroribus, hoc est, multis post extinctum Boetium annis, condemnatam constaret. Nisi si quis existimaverit Platonem, ut alia multa confinxit, ita hic, ut inquisitionem de animarum descensu omnium difficillimam illustraret, hoc animae in inferiora descendenti corpus dare voluisse, excogitata scilicet ratione qua ejus ad corpus humilikon animandum aptitudinem designaret: expressisseque Boetium Platonis mentem Themistii sensu sic lib. 1 de anima scribentis (...) ‘Apud Platonem, vehiculum illud rarum ac splendidum nihil aliud, quam ingenium e quo animus constet, ostendit’” (editio Vulpiana, 509-510).

¹⁰¹ For a modern commentary along the same lines see J. Gruber, *Kommentar zu Boethius De consolatione Philosophiae*, Berlin, New York 1978 (Texte und Kommentare, Band 9), 284-285.

¹⁰² Edited in *Lettres et opuscules inédits précédés d’une introduction*, ed. L. A. Foucher de Careil, Paris 1854, reprinted: Hildesheim, New York 1975, 265-273. Being a mere paraphrase, it is without much interest.

¹⁰³ Letter from Leibniz to Sophie Charlotte, quoted in A. P. Coudert, *Leibniz and the Kabbalah*, Dordrecht 1995 (Archives internationales d’histoire des idées, 142), 130-131. On the question of Leibniz’ relations with Van Helmont, see also S. Brown, ‘F. M. van Helmont: His Philosophical Connections and the Receptions of his Later Cabbalistic Philosophy’, *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. M. A. Stewart, Oxford 1997 (Oxford Studies in the History of Philosophy, 2), 97-116.

¹⁰⁴ Coudert, *Leibniz and the Kabbalah*, 130.

Leibniz' public opinion. As he writes in his *Discourse on Metaphysics*: Plato's theory of reminiscence "is very sound, provided we take it in the right way and remove the mistake about pre-existence (of souls), and do not imagine that the soul must already at some other time have distinctly known and thought about what it learns and thinks about now".¹⁰⁵

The belief in the pre-existence of the soul, which was cherished in the circles of the Cambridge Platonists and by scholars such as Van Helmont and his friend, the kabbalist Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (who translated the *Consolatio* into German), could of course not be entertained in the Middle Ages. As we have seen, medieval scholars had to think of other strategies to escape the tyranny of the letter, and they were strengthened in their approach by the 'integumenta' which Plato and, following him, Boethius had employed. Their interpretations testify to the inventive and creative ways in which medieval readers twisted 'the waxen nose of authorities'.

¹⁰⁵ G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Texts*, ed. and transl. R. S. Woolhouse and R. Francks, Oxford 1998, 78. Cf. his letter to Foucher from 1687/8: "The Pythagoreans obscured the truth with their metempsychosis" (*Leibniz's 'New System' and Associated Contemporary Texts*, ed. and transl. R. S. Woolhouse and R. Francks, Oxford 1997, 55).