Though not a great original thinker, Boethius is a figure of considerable importance in the history of Western thought. Steeped in the culture of classical antiquity, he had a profound influence on the medieval world by his works on parts of the quadrivium, his translations of the logical works of Aristotle and the *Isagoge* of Porphyry and his commentaries on these, and especially by his masterpiece *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, which was translated by writers so diverse as Alfred the Great, Notker Labeo and Geoffrey Chaucer.

In the introduction to his monumental monograph Signor Obertello writes: ‘The object of this work, the fruit of vast researches ripening over many years, is to present “the whole Boethius” — his life, his works, his sources, and his thought — in a single volume, such as has till now been wanting.’ This object he has achieved magnificently, and it is safe to say that for anyone proposing to do scholarly work on Boethius the book will be indispensable.

The work has its longueurs, e.g. when O. is providing background philosophical information or elaborating on some problem of philosophy, and no doubt scholars will contest some of his conclusions, but his views are well argued, and the fruits of his massive research are readily available to the student who is seeking information on some particular topic, for there is an index of names and a very full analytical index covering 12 pages.

The bibliography, published separately, must be just about exhaustive. It consists of two parts. The first (pp.13-226) is specifically Boethian, listing the editions and translations of Boethius’s works and studies dealing with the topics considered in Volume 1 — life, works, sources, thought. Under the head of ‘studies’ we find no fewer than 682 works, on most of which he offers critical comment, sometimes lengthy. In the second part (pp.231-308) 837 works dealing with the historical background and especially the sources of Boethius’s thought are listed without comment. This volume too has a complete index of names and an analytical index.

In the 150 pages O. devotes to the life of Boethius, he fills in the historical background of his brilliant career and its sudden tragic end. We read of the Roman nobility, fretful under the Gothic yoke and dreaming of a return of the former imperial glories, yet collaborating with Theodoric in the work of government; of the grand design of Symmachus, Boethius’s father-in-law, to make the treasures of Greek culture available in Latin, a design which came to nothing when they were both executed by Theodoric not long before his death in 526; of the intrigues among the members of the Roman senate, some of whom were envious of Boethius’s influence in the affairs of state and resented his even-handed administration of justice; of Theodoric, nominally a subject of
the Byzantine Emperor, but ever fearful of imperial intervention, especially in the last years of his reign.

Boethius, born about 475, became consul *sine collega* in 511, saw his sons elevated to the consulate in 522 and was himself *magister officiorum* 522-523. Some time after August 523 he was accused on several grounds, the main one being that he ‘hoped for Roman liberty’. He was tried by a senatorial committee, found guilty and exiled to Pavia, where he wrote *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. On the orders of Theodoric he was executed at Pavia or Verona some time between the summer of 525 and 526.

O. discusses the charge that Boethius was guilty of treason against Theodoric and gives a number of reasons for thinking that the charge was groundless. For one thing, in 527 Amalasunta, the daughter of Theodoric and regent for his grandson, declared Boethius innocent and restored to his heirs the property that had been confiscated. It looks as if Cyprian, a member of the Roman nobility, a rival of Boethius and an intimate of Theodoric, had poisoned the king’s mind with calumnies against his rival, at a time when Theodoric’s political position had been greatly weakened by the death of allied rulers in Burgundy and Africa and the accession of Justin, a Latin, to the imperial throne. Feeling insecure and perhaps as a response to the anti-Arian measures taken by Justin, he struck with unwonted haste at the most brilliant member of the Roman party, as a warning to any who might be tempted to work for the restoration of imperial rule in his dominions.

The extant works of Boethius include treatises on arithmetic and music (the *Geometria* is spurious), translations of works on logic and commentaries on these, some theological treatises and the *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. He intended to translate all the works of Plato and Aristotle and to show their substantial unity, but in fact he translated only the *Organon* of Aristotle and the *Isagoge* of Porphyry. It is of interest to note that the version of the *Categories* used in the Dark Ages, e.g. by Alcuin, was not that of Boethius but an earlier version. It seems that he followed the practice of Porphyry and wrote two commentaries on these texts, one a simple explanation of the text for beginners and the other a more elaborate treatment for more advanced students, but many of these commentaries are lost.

O. maintains that the theological treatises *De Trinitate*, *De hebdomadibus* and *Contra Eutychen et Nestorium*, attributed to Boethius by Cassiodorus, are certainly authentic – a point of some importance as establishing that Boethius was a Christian, and not, as some critics have inferred from *De Consolatione*, nothing more than a Neoplatonist philosopher. Some critics think that *De fide catholica*, a ‘small masterpiece’ in the opinion of Rand, is authentic, but most deny its authenticity. O. after a very full discussion of the question, is doubtful.

After dealing with the *spuria*, O. discusses at length (pp.297-341) the chronology of the genuine works and sets out his findings in a table on p.342. He distinguishes three periods in Boethius’s literary activity. In the first
(500-509), which he calls Vittorinian-Nichomachean, he places the works on music, arithmetic, and geometry (now lost) and his translation of the Isagoge and two commentaries on that work; in the second (510-517), which he calls Porphyrian, he places the translation of most of the Organon and the commentaries on these books; in the third (518-524), which he calls Ciceronian, he places the commentary on the Topics of Cicero, the translation of the Topics of Aristotle and the commentary on this work, and finally the De Consolatione.

O. has a very thorough treatment of the sources on which Boethius drew (pp.385-562). From this it is clear that this 'last great representative of the classical epoch of human thought' had a wide and accurate knowledge of the philosophical tradition as found in the works of the great masters and the commentators. He is indebted especially to the Neoplatonists like Porphyry, Jamblichus, Ammonius Hermiae, and Proclus, though his connection with Proclus is not sure, since he never expressly cites him. He also owed a good deal to Victorinus, though Victorinus's approach to Porphyry was that of a rhetorician, for whom philosophy was one of the fifteen modes of discourse, whereas Boethius was a philosopher, concerned not so much with words as with the realities they signified.

In the fourth and final part of the book (pp.565-781) O. discusses Boethius's philosophical views on such questions as the nature of being, the existence of God, the divine eternity, Providence and the problem of evil, and concludes with an evaluation of Boethius as a Christian thinker. Boethius's concept of philosophy, he says, could best be described as Pythagorean-Platonic. The quest for wisdom begins with the study of the quadrivium, of which the highest part is mathematics; then follows logic; and the quest attains its goal in the metaphysical knowledge of God. It seems fairly clear that Boethius's metaphysics, in the Greek tradition, is essentialist: for him esse signifies form. It is true that in the De Trinitate he distinguishes between esse and id quod est, a distinction which St Thomas interpreted as expressing his own doctrine regarding the real distinction in created being between esse and essentia. But O. thinks that Duhem is probably right when he links Boethius's distinction with the view of Themistius, for whom esse designated the common nature, Aristotle's 'second substance', and id quod est the concrete nature, Aristotle's 'first substance'.

O. suggests that Boethius's account of the philosopher's itinerarium mentis in Deum, in which the mind rises from the contemplation of the forms in matter to the Pure Form which coincides with Esse in its fullness, corresponds to the via per esse on which the quinque viae of St Thomas converge. But this is very doubtful, since esse does not mean for St Thomas what it means for the Neoplatonist.

O. rejects the view of Sulowski (p.671) that Boethius did not recognise creation ex nihilo, and deals at some length (pp.683-690) with the curious theory of Ford that the famous Boethian definition of eternity could be given a
Whiteheadian interpretation as signifying that God is imperishable growth. God, for Boethius, is the conditor, pater, fons et origo rerum, and hence no mere Demiurge. For the pagan philosophers, including the Neoplatonists, the eternity of the universe was, in the words of Bréhier, a ‘fundamental dogma’. Boethius reserved the term eternity for God; for the duration of the universe he used the term sempiternity, to indicate the essential difference in the two modes of duration. He does indeed speak of the infinite motus of temporal things, but it has to be remembered that in De Consolatione he speaks throughout as a philosopher, and St Thomas, it may be remembered, was of the opinion that we cannot establish philosophically that time had a beginning.

In discussing the divine foreknowledge of future free acts, Boethius argues for the reality of freedom and reconciles this with the divine foreknowledge by appealing to the divine eternity; acts which for us are past, present and future, God sees in an ever-present ‘Now’. This is all right as far as it goes, but O. comments (p.731), one may fairly ask whether Boethius’s account of the divine nature is not too exclusively cognitive or contemplative.

In the final chapter of the book (pp.746-785), in which O. discusses Boethius as a Christian thinker, he puts the De Consolatione Philosophiae in historical perspective. In a world in which Christians and pagans received the same academic education, and pagan philosophy was spiritualist, ascetic and religious, it was necessary to make a clear distinction between the religious truths that could be established by reason alone, and those that were known only by faith. Moreover, the distrust of pagan thought expressed, for example, by Tertullian (who however made much use of it), was not required in Boethius’s time when Christianity was triumphant. Boethius, centuries before St Thomas, had a clear understanding of the distinction between theology and philosophy. Thus he quotes Aristotle to the effect that great heed must be paid to the diversity of different disciplines and praises philosophy for not bringing in reasons from other fields (De Consolatione, III. 12); and when it is a question of the punishment of sin in the next life, he says (Ibid. IV, 4) that ‘to discuss the doctrines of Hell and Purgatory is not our business here’. In short, Boethius dealt with theological problems in his theological opuscula, and in the De Consolatione Philosophiae with philosophical problems on the philosophical plane: it is a methodology that has much to recommend it.

These few comments will have made it clear, I think, that Obertello’s Severino Boezio is a landmark in Boethian studies. The book is somewhat longer than it need have been, for there are some repetitions, it incorporates a certain amount of background material that could probably have been dispensed with, and Italian rhetoric is not remarkable for succinctness. But even if it were reduced by, say, a quarter, there would still, I think, be little hope of it achieving an English translation, which is rather a pity.

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