

The translations of Alfred and his circle, and the misappropriation of the past

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It is a pleasure and a privilege to celebrate the achievement of H.M. Chadwick, the creator of a great department and the founder of a highly successful discipline, perhaps indeed the founder of English cultural studies in Cambridge. I never met Chadwick, but I have the most vivid memories of the times when, as a student here, I would see Nora Chadwick and other pupils and protégés of the great H.M. – Bruce Dickins, Rachel Bromwich, Dorothy Whitelock, Peter Hunter Blair – solidly filling the front row of meetings of the Anglo-Saxon Society when I was introducing the speaker. Since I had almost always assured the speaker in advance that there would only be undergraduates present and that there was no need to prepare anything very new or substantial, it was invariably a fraught moment.

It was thanks ultimately to Chadwick that I found a home when I began graduate work in Cambridge. I had read the English Tripos and therefore spent much of the final year concentrating on such great modern ‘English’ writers as Aeschylus and Sophocles, Chekhov and Ibsen, but when I applied to do graduate work on Ælfric I found that Anglo-Saxon was not part of the English Faculty and was consigned to the Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology, where Chadwick had hidden the Department of Anglo-Saxon for safe-keeping. But I never quite forgot my early training in English at Cambridge, never forgot that in any text there were at least seven types of ambiguity and that if a text meant anything at all – and there was always the chance that it might just ‘be’ – it certainly did not mean what it said. There is perhaps some influence of that training on what I have to say about King Alfred.

The programme of translations and adaptations of Latin texts which is associated with the circle of King Alfred at the end of the ninth century is one of the crucial cultural moments in Anglo-Saxon history. It represents an important stage in the developing status of the

vernacular as a written language to be used for serious writings, but it is also an important statement about the perceived relation of Anglo-Saxon culture to the world of late Roman culture. For it was primarily an act of retrieving for a new age some critical texts which emerged from the last phase of the Roman empire: the philosophical and theological study called the *Soliloquia*, written by St Augustine in Italy in 386-7, in the months when he was teetering on the brink of the change from Roman rhetorician to Christian apologist; the history of the world written by the Spanish priest Orosius in 417, at the suggestion of St Augustine, in response to the sack of Rome by the Goths and the threat of a relapse into Classical paganism; *De consolatione Philosophiae*, written in exile in Italy by the Roman philosopher Boethius in 524, in response to his own loss of power and influence under the Gothic king Theoderic; and two works by Gregory the Great, *Regula Pastoralis* and *Dialogi*, written at Rome in the early 590s at the time when another Germanic people, the Lombards, were threatening the city.

Scholarly discussion of these adaptations and appropriations has been marked in recent years by two main concerns: a literary historical issue, about who wrote what; and a historical and biographical one, about what the texts, and especially their apparent differences from their originals, can tell us about the thinking and ideology of Alfred and his circle. Somewhere between the two is a literary or textual issue, about the construction of textual authority within these discourses. I want to argue that this is a very important and adventurous aspect of the writing, and that it has significant things to tell us about the cultural attitudes of the time.

Our standard guide to the thinking behind those translations is King Alfred's preface to the translation of *Regula pastoralis*, or 'The Pastoral Care' as its English version is generally known.¹ It offers a remarkably simple, perhaps even naive, and certainly misleading perspective on the kind of appropriation of the past which was involved: the Latin works of the past are the repositories of wisdom, which is needed for the present, and since the Latin language is no longer understood in England in Alfred's time, then the texts must be

¹*King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*, ed. H. Sweet, EETS os 45 and 50 (London, 1871), pp. 2-8.

translated into English and the people must be taught to read in English, in order to have access to the wisdom of the ancients. Alfred acknowledges that his translation is based on his own understanding of the original, with the help of others, and may be sense for sense rather than word for word; but the king does not suggest there are any further issues or problems in the recovery of past wisdom for a new age and in a new language.

If we turn, however, to the preface to one of the later Alfredian works, the adaptation of Augustine's *Soliloquia*, a rather more complex agenda is set out. The Old English author, apparently Alfred himself, presents himself gathering wood of all kinds from the trees in the forest to make a house for himself.²

Gaderode me þonne kigclas, and stuþanscaftas ... and bohtimbru and bolttimbru, and, to ælcum þara weorca þe ic wyrcan cuðe, þa wlitegostan treowo be þam dele ðe ic aberan meihte. Ne com ic naþer mid anre byrðene ham þe me ne lyste ealne þane wude ham brengan, gif ic hyne ealne aberan meihte; on ælcum treowo ic geseah hwæthwugu þæs þe ic æt ham beþorfte. Forþam ic lære ælcne ðara þe maga si and manigne wæn hæbbe, þæt he menige to þam ilcan wuda þar ic ðas stuðanscaftas cearf, fetige hym þar ma, and gefeðrige hys wænas mid fegrum gerdum, þæt he mage windan manigne smicerne wah, and manig ænlic hus settan, and fegerne tun timbrian, and þær murge and softe mid mæge on-eardian ægðer ge wintras ge sumeras, swa swa ic nu ne gyt ne dyde.

'I then gathered for myself staves and props ... and cross-bars and beams, and, for each of the structures which I knew how to build, the finest timbers I could carry. I never came away with a single load without wishing to bring home the whole of the forest, if I could have carried it all – in every tree I saw something for which I had a need at home. Accordingly, I would advise everyone who is strong and has many wagons to direct his steps to that same forest where I cut these props, and to fetch more for himself and to load his wagons with well-cut staves, so that he may weave many elegant walls and put up many splendid houses and so build a fine homestead, and there may live pleasantly and in tranquillity both in winter and in summer – as I have not yet done.'

² *King Alfred's Version of St Augustine's Soliloquies*, ed. and trans. T. A. Carnicelli (Cambridge, MA, 1969), p. 47, lines 1-12. For clarity I have omitted the italics, brackets and other marks which Carnicelli used to signal restorations and emendations. The translation is from S. Keynes and M. Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser's 'Life of King Alfred' and Other Contemporary Sources* (Harmondsworth, 1983), p. 138.

It is usually concluded that this is a metaphor for his literary role in taking material from the works of the Fathers to create his own.³ Alfred was here probably drawing on traditional metaphors of the literary process, such as the work of bees gathering nectar from the flowers of the field to make honey, or individuals gathering blooms to make their own bouquets. The fact that later in the Old English text we find the term ‘blooms’ (*blostman*) used of the work lends support to that view.⁴ But the change, if it is one, to timber and houses makes a very real difference to the implications of the metaphor, denying any generic similarity between Alfred’s structure and the sources from which he takes his materials. The works of the Fathers cannot easily be equated to trees in the forest; they are rather the houses which the Fathers themselves had built, buildings from which Alfred is apparently taking materials in order to construct a different kind of house of his own. One thinks of Tolkien’s adaptation of this image in his famous lecture on *Beowulf*, where he represented the poet as a man who builds a tower with stones taken from old ruined buildings;⁵ but the works of Augustine, Gregory and Jerome, to which Alfred refers, were not ruins, they were solid structures which could still be viewed and inhabited. We seem to be some distance here from the picture which Alfred gave in the preface to ‘The Pastoral Care’, of a programme for reproducing in English the works and wisdom of the past. Here Alfred is claiming to be making his own work out of materials taken from the works of the past, which are simply treated as a quarry for old usable bits – a fact somehow disguised by the use of the forest-image with its implications that the author is making a house out of natural growths.

The contrast between the two prefaces invites us to think seriously about the way in which the appropriation of past writings is represented within the Alfredian writings, for it can be seen to be far more problematic than has generally been recognised. My primary

³ S. B. Greenfield and D. G. Calder, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York, 1986), p. 52.

⁴ The image of the bee is used in this way by Asser (§76) when writing about King Alfred’s literary endeavours; see *Asser’s Life of King Alfred*, ed. W. H. Stevenson (Oxford, 1904), pp. 59–62, translated by Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 91–2.

⁵ J. R. R. Tolkien, ‘*Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics*’, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 22 (1936), 245–95, especially pp. 248–9.

concern here is textual authority: whose authority lies behind the text presented to a reader, and particularly behind a text passed off as a translation, and what sort of relationship is constructed within the text between the author and the translator? This is partly about the representation of authority, that is, the degree of distance, criticism, irony which the translators adopt towards their source-authors, and partly about misrepresentation, the attribution towards ancient authors of things which they did not say.

The substantial differences of content and perspective between the Old English Orosius, Boethius and ‘Soliloquies’ and their Latin originals is a familiar matter, but it is equally important to recognise the ways in which all three claim insistently within the body of the text that they are faithful representations of late Classical works. They identify their source, and from time to time they remind the Anglo-Saxon reader that the voice which is addressing them is that of Orosius or Boethius or Augustine, speaking from a particular historical moment and situation (and we should recall that all three originals do speak from a moment of political or personal crisis, or both). The Anglo-Saxon translators go out of their way, quite imaginatively at times, to remind us of the fifth- or sixth-century author who is speaking to the late ninth-century audience and of the context in which they spoke, and the translators rarely if ever let go of that voice and speak explicitly in their own. It is easy to forget this fact because modern-day commentary tends to focus on the bits which seem to us characteristically Anglo-Saxon or Alfredian, often anthologising them in readers or translations for historians and presenting them as the views of King Alfred or his associates.⁶ And so we talk more commonly of the Alfredian voice than of the Orosian or Boethian voice in the Old English works, or of the way in which they have been adapted to an Anglo-Saxon readership. But we forget that these passages are in no way signalled as Alfredian within the text, and to a reader who was himself Anglo-Saxon or Alfredian such passages might not have stood out in the same way; and that a reader

⁶ See for instance the time-honoured *Sweet’s Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse*, ed. D. Whitelock, 15th ed. (Oxford, 1967), pp. 10–16; Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 123–60; and *English Historical Documents, c. 500–1042*, trans. D. Whitelock, Eng. Hist. Documents 1, 2nd ed. (London, 1979), pp. 917–20.

outside the immediate Alfredian circle had no way of knowing that any passage was not derived from the original Latin work. What to us seems revealingly Alfredian may have seemed to an Anglo-Saxon reader an interesting revelation of the personality of Boethius or Augustine.

To an Anglo-Saxon reader, then, these Old English adaptations insisted that they were essentially the work of Augustine, Orosius and Boethius, and spoke in their voice. Often that sense of the historical voice, the voice of the original author, was a fabrication: the original authors did not say what was attributed to them, or they were not in the situation described. Yet if its effect was at times to lend the apparent authority of the original author to the views and beliefs of the translator, it may also have had the effect of objectifying the voice of the text and underlining the significant distance between original author and contemporary audience; for an Anglo-Saxon reader the works are riddled with historical ironies, with a sense of time having moved on. This raises questions about what the Alfredian writers were trying to do, how they saw their relation with the Roman past and especially their relation with ancient authority. Were the ‘truths’ being offered in these texts seen as still valid in Anglo-Saxon times, or only as historical perceptions, the views of writers rooted in their own past? What is going on when the Anglo-Saxon writers pass off their own views and arguments as those of their late Antique predecessors? To what extent were they consciously trying to appropriate the authority of ancient writers for their own views, or trying to appropriate ancient literature for their own time and sensibility? I want to focus on three texts, the Old English Orosius, Boethius and ‘Soliloquies’: I shall start with the mildest case and end with the most extreme.

Orosius

Orosius’s *Historiarum aduersum paganos libri septem* was written, a few years after the Gothic sack of Rome in 410, as an attempt to locate that event in a providential reading of history. The Old English version as it survives has no preface, and we do not know whether there was one, or whether if there was it identified its author or said anything about the circumstances in which the original was produced.

But the Old English text has frequent reference to the original author: *cwæð Orosius*, the translator keeps injecting from the first page, as if determined to remind his readers that these are Orosius's views, not his.⁷ The Old English version also repeatedly recalls for its readers the original context and purpose of the work, using the present tense and first- and second-person reference as if the readers were themselves still fifth-century Romans – ‘those were the times which the Romans now sigh after, saying that the Goths have caused them a worse time than they had before, and yet they were plundering for only three days’; or again, ‘the Goths have plundered you a little, and taken your city, and slain a few of you’; or again, ‘you Romans, said Orosius, when you complain all the time about the one attack which the Goths made against you, why will you not think about the many earlier ones which the Gauls repeatedly and humiliatingly dragged you through’.⁸ We are constantly reminded of the fact that the text is to be located in early fifth-century Italy (or the Roman empire): ‘Arcadius succeeded to power in the eastern part and maintained it for twelve years, and Honorius succeeded to the western part, and still has it now, said Orosius’ (referring to the year 395).⁹ And this is not simply a matter of mindlessly translating what was in front of him, since the translator shows himself perfectly willing to change and add and rewrite, and indeed not all of these references to the sack of Rome are in the Latin text; objectifying the author and emphasising the original context of the work was an important part of his agenda. The translator is clearly fascinated by the role of Orosius the author, as he tried to read history and reproach the Romans at a moment of crisis in the past.

But while the text insists on its status as an address by the original author Orosius to his original readers the Romans, the translator meanwhile is working away on his own account, supplementing and rewriting to reflect his own view of what really happened and how the map of the world really works out. Much of this comes under the heading of updating, explaining details which

⁷ *The Old English Orosius*, ed. J. Bately, EETS ss 6 (London, 1980), pp. 8.11–12, 27.11, 27.22, etc.

⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 52, 31, 77. Translations are my own.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 155.

would be obscure to a later reader, and adding information on subjects of importance to Anglo-Saxon readers, like Northern geography. The explicit attribution of one long section to the Norwegian Ohthere in conversation with King Alfred would no doubt have signalled to an attentive reader that not everything in the Old English Orosius was to be found in Orosius's own text. More difficult, however, are historical statements which differ from Orosius's but are firmly attributed to his authority.

Perhaps we can focus on the last page of the Old English Orosius as a brief example. This begins with a firm ascription to Orosius and a direct address to the original Roman audience.¹⁰

Nugiet eow Romane mæg gescomian, cwæð Orosius, þæt ge swa heanlic gepoht sceoldon on eow geniman for anes monnes ege and for anes monnes geblote, þæt ge sædon þæt þa hæðnan tida wæron beteran þonne þa cristnan ...

‘Now you Romans can feel ashamed, said Orosius, that you should have harboured so disgraceful a thought, from fear of one man, and from one man's sacrificing, as to say that the heathen times were better than the Christian ...’

But the page and the whole work end with a narrative very different from Orosius's own account. Orosius reported that after sacking Rome the Goths soon abandoned Italy and tried to settle in Gaul but were then driven into Spain by the Roman forces. Some then tried to escape to Africa but ended in disaster. The Old English version has a quite different story, reporting that the Goths settled in Italy and entered into an alliance with Honorius. Orosius did not say this at all; but the Old English version strongly implies that he did, and it is difficult to see how this could be due to any misunderstanding of the Latin.¹¹ One could argue that the Alfredian translator simply thought that Orosius had got it wrong and that he needed to correct him. Perhaps this counted as geographical information for the translator – the Goths may have disappeared from Italy by his own time, but he

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 156.

¹¹ See further my article, ‘The Anglo-Saxons and the Goths: rewriting the sack of Rome’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 31 (2002), 47–68, and also S. Harris, ‘The Alfredian World History and Anglo-Saxon Identity’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 100 (2001), 481–510.

would know from Boethius and from Gregory's *Dialogi* that Goths were there in the sixth century. But one can also see that the claim that the Goths settled in Italy by agreement with the Emperor and in marriage-alliance with him is a very interesting rereading of the history of the Empire and the barbarians, with its implications of a peaceful and gradual transition by settlement and negotiation rather than a conquest;¹² and it is by implication offered as Orosius's own account. One inevitably wonders quite how deliberate this 'correction' of Orosius, and implicit attribution of the result to Orosius, was.

One function of the translator's self-effacing insistence on the presence of Orosius as narrator may then be to claim his authority for the translator's own rank rereading of history and geography. But there is something more in this objectification of the Orosian voice within the text. It must have reminded Anglo-Saxon readers in the late ninth century of their distance from the context in which Orosius wrote, and of the gap between his reading of contemporary events and the view of hindsight. When he told Anglo-Saxon readers that despite the fleeting Gothic incursion the Roman empire still flourished and that it was under the protection of divine providence, were they to note the way in which history had overturned that judgment, or was there some way in which it could be held to be still true? It is not easy to say whether Alfredian readers would have accepted that the Roman empire still flourished in their own time. Bede had recorded the fall of the Western Empire in 455/6, but this is not repeated in the Old English translation or in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.¹³ The crowning of Charlemagne in 800 might have been accepted by Anglo-Saxons as evidence of the restoration of the Roman empire, or even its continuity. But in the 890s the Carolingian empire was in disarray and the grand imperial title conferred on Charlemagne had fallen to a Lombard duke after a decade or two of vacancy, and it is unlikely that Alfredian readers would have counted that as the continued

¹² See further Harris, *ibid.*

¹³ *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), p. 66; *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. T. Miller, 2 vols, EETS os 95 and 96 (London, 1890-1); *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MS A*, ed. J. M. Batley, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a Collaborative Edition 3* (Cambridge, 1986).

flourishing of the Roman empire.¹⁴ But the eastern empire went on thinking of itself as the Roman empire until 1453, and perhaps the Anglo-Saxons accepted that definition.

The question whether Anglo-Saxon readers read Orosius as a reliable authority whose views were still valid for their own time is important. Orosius's philosophy of history is heavily dependent on the picture which he draws of contemporary events and the contemporary political situation, and indeed of the history of the world up to his time. The Alfredian readers may have been in no position to challenge his view of the pre-Orosian past, but they did know about the course of events since Orosius – the fall of the Western Empire, the turmoil of the migration-period – which might be seen to invalidate Orosius's optimistic view of history.

Again, when Orosius criticised the Romans for complaining so extravagantly about the attacks of the Goths, and insisted that they were not so very damaging, it is difficult to imagine that that did not have considerable resonance in the translator's own time. One cannot but be reminded here of the contemporary Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's unexpected assertion, after recounting the depredations of vikings in England, that they had not in fact caused much damage in comparison with the harm done by disease, storm and the deaths of leading counsellors.¹⁵ But how were Anglo-Saxon readers to read Orosius here – as an authority and figure of wisdom, whose criticism of moaning minnies in the fifth century could equally well be applied to Anglo-Saxon malcontents who complained about vikings in the ninth? Or is the Anglo-Saxon translator inviting his readers to look more objectively and critically at the ancient authority Orosius, and to question his dismissive view of the effect of the barbarians? After all, according to Anglo-Saxon versions of history the Goths under Alaric did in fact bring down the Roman empire, despite Orosius's insistence

¹⁴ But it is perhaps hard to be sure; Janet Nelson has argued that by Alfred's death at least 'Carolingian dynasticism seemed to be enjoying a new lease of life' and that the various disasters did not 'cause loss of confidence in the dynasty as such, nor in Carolingian hegemonial empire in general' ('Alfred's Carolingian Contemporaries', in *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-centenary Conferences*, ed. T. Reuter (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 293–310, at p. 303).

¹⁵ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MS A*, ed. Bately, pp. 59–60, *sub anno* 896.

that they had not.¹⁶ Hindsight lent ironies to a reading of Orosius and might have questioned his wisdom.

Two points, then, need to be emphasised about the Old English Orosius: first, the translator foregrounds or objectifies the author Orosius within the text, as someone with a point of view and a view of historical processes, in a context which might serve to ironise or question that view; secondly, he is ready to correct Orosius's account of history, quite radically in this last example, while simultaneously claiming Orosius as his authority. Both points contrast interestingly with the simple perspective of the wisdom of the Latin past offered by King Alfred in his preface to the Old English 'Pastoral Care', and they suggest something more nuanced than the respect for past scholarship implied there.

Boethius

Like the Orosius, Alfred's Old English adaptation of Boethius's *De consolatione Philosophiae*¹⁷ works hard to keep its readers aware that this text is essentially a late Classical work created by a historical figure Boethius in a specific personal and political situation, rather than (or as well as) a philosophical work of universal validity. Alfred begins by supplying a historical and biographical introduction which describes the invasion of Italy by the Goths, the rise of Theoderic as king, the background of Boethius himself, his conspiracy against Theoderic and his arrest and imprisonment, all as context for the dialogue which follows between Boethius and Wisdom. As the character Boethius takes up the narrative, the Old English text strongly emphasises his identity, referring to him several times by name, allowing him to mention aspects of his personal life and his relationship with Theoderic the king. This is not simply a matter of some biographical left-overs from the original uneasily rubbing shoulders with new developments of the argument by Alfred. The latter has gone out of his way to strengthen the impression, for a reader, that Boethius is present as narrator of the text – all three references to his relationship with Theoderic, for instance, are

¹⁶ See the fuller discussion of this issue in my article, 'The Anglo-Saxons and the Goths'.

¹⁷ *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius, De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. W. J. Sedgefield (Oxford, 1899).

additions by the translator.¹⁸ Yet beneath this pretence of a Boethian voice and an early sixth-century situation, Alfred is rewriting very substantially. Even his picture of Boethius the author is extremely imaginative, not to say fictional. In the Latin text Boethius presents himself as a loyal servant of the king and of Rome, who has been betrayed and conspired against by fellow senators and politicians, and as a result ousted from his position of power and exiled from the court; he nowhere blames the king and hardly refers to him as an actor in his fall. Alfred presents Boethius as the victim of a tyrant-king, a courtier and counsellor who tries to promote a coup against the king and is discovered and cast into a prison-cell. Alfred seems to insist that the text is Boethian not Alfredian, but he has himself largely invented the Boethius who figures in the work.

One question which inevitably arises from this is whether the philosophical arguments voiced by Wisdom were to be read by Anglo-Saxon readers as still universally valid, or as emerging from the specific personal and political context in which they were originally written. The question is a more complex one than with the Orosius, since at the surface-level the philosophical arguments are assigned not to the late Antique statesman and intellectual called Boethius but to the figure called Wisdom, who might be seen as retaining a continuing authority even if the prisoner Boethius does not. While the Old English text does insist that the speaker and initiator of the work is Boethius, it does not in fact invite its Anglo-Saxon readers at any point to penetrate the fiction and recall that the whole text is ultimately his construct, not just the part which he speaks; it describes Boethius as a prisoner singing the opening lament and then being addressed by Wisdom, but not as an author writing the text afterwards.

As has often been noted, Alfred's presentation of Wisdom is much less obviously fictive than the allegorical portrait of Philosophy, and it would thus have been easier for an unsophisticated reader to accept the dialogue as an event which in some sense did happen – to read Wisdom perhaps as divine wisdom, not as a figment of Boethius's imagination. In other words, Boethius is identified within the Old English work as its narrator but perhaps not as its author, not as the

¹⁸ See further my article, 'The Player-king: Identification and Self-representation in King Alfred's Writings', in *Alfred the Great*, ed. Reuter, pp. 137–50.

imager and creator of the dialogue. It is hard to tell how a representative Anglo-Saxon reader responded to such literary devices, although of course fictionalised narrators are commonplace in Old English poetry. But there is at least one point at which Wisdom's authority is seriously undermined by historical irony: his cheerful comment to Boethius that things are not as bad as he makes out, since his wife and sons and his father-in-law (the senator Symmachus) are all alive and well though missing him.¹⁹ That might have been acceptable and not ironic when Boethius was writing the work: Boethius was in exile but not necessarily under threat of death or even permanent loss of power, and there was no reason to suppose that his family was at risk. But the comment must have seemed very inadequate and ironic to Anglo-Saxon readers in the ninth century: they would have been aware of the tradition that Theoderic had executed both Boethius and Symmachus shortly after the *Consolatio* was written, and perhaps also of the tradition that Boethius's sons were killed as well. Such things must have undermined the Anglo-Saxon reader's faith in the universality of the wisdom offered in Boethius's text, while at the same time highlighting the sense of the drama of the particular personal crisis from which the work is supposed to have arisen as Boethius and Wisdom ponder over the nature of happiness in blissful ignorance of the full horrors which await him.

One of the questions here is whether Alfred and his contemporaries were reading the *Consolatio* as a work of philosophy still valid in their own time, as the preface to 'The Pastoral Care' strongly implies, or as an account of a personal drama, the tragic story of a sixth-century statesman. The evidence of near-contemporary responses points in both directions. When Ælfric a century later than Alfred reproduced some of the philosophical arguments from the Old English translation in his own sermons, he was clearly reading it as still valid. He generalises the *faux-naïf* objections of Boethius the prisoner with the expression 'now some people say ...' and appropriates the authoritative answers of Wisdom to his own voice, 'now I say in truth ...'.²⁰ But around the same time Ælfric's friend and

¹⁹ *King Alfred's Boethius*, ed. Sedgefield, pp. 22.3–23.1.

²⁰ *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, ed. W. W. Skeat, 4 vols, EETS os 76, 82, 94 and 114 (London,

patron Æthelweard referred to King Alfred's version as a moving account of Boethius's sufferings, not a work of philosophy; he tells us that Alfred wrote it in such a way '... that not only for scholars but for any who might hear it read, the tearful passion of the book of Boethius would be in a measure brought to life'.²¹

When Walter Sedgefield published his *Modern English* translation of the Old English text in 1900,²² he presented in italics vast swathes of text to show that these passages are Alfredian rather than Boethian. Anglo-Saxon readers did not have that advantage. Was Alfred seeking to pass off his own arguments as Boethian? Or was he writing in the confidence that educated readers would recognise the fictive nature of the genre in which he wrote; or was he, as some commentators have argued,²³ unaware of how much he differed from Boethius? The expansion of Classical allusions which is so characteristic of the Alfredian adaptation may be the equivalent of the geographical detail in the Orosius. Alfred may have argued that these were details known to Boethius and his original readers and that he was only making explicit what was implicit in the Latin text, as a modern translator might do with footnotes – although there are tricky questions about whose voice is speaking. More difficult is something like the famous passage on the means of government, so often anthologised as an expression of Alfred's own political views and experiences.²⁴ It may be that, and certainly for us it would seem

1881-1900; repr. in 2 vols, 1966). Ælfric used the Alfredian Boethius in nos 1 and 17; the quotations are from no. 17, lines 222 and 225 (vol. I, pp. 378–80). The use of the Alfredian Boethius has recently been questioned by Mechthild Gretsch, who has described it as a case of 'isolated verbal echoes' ('Ælfric and Gregory the Great', in *Ælfric's Lives of Canonised Popes*, ed. D.G. Scragg (Kalamazoo, MI, 2001), pp. 11–54, at p. 25); it is in fact a matter of a passage of some fifty lines in no. 17 agreeing almost verbatim with a section of the Alfredian Boethius. Her dismissal of Ælfric's debt to the Old English Bede (*ibid.* p. 48) seems similarly to ignore the evidence of substantial agreement in wording and content such as is not found in any other use of Bede by Ælfric.

²¹ *The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. and trans. A. Campbell (Edinburgh, 1962), p. 51.

²² W. J. Sedgefield, *King Alfred's Version of the Consolations of Philosophy done into Modern English* (Oxford, 1900).

²³ See for instance K. Otten, *König Alfreds Boethius* (Tübingen, 1964), and W. F. Bolton, 'How Boethian is Alfred's *Boethius*?', in *Studies in Earlier Old English Prose*, ed. P. E. Szarmach (Albany, NY, 1986), pp. 153–68.

²⁴ *King Alfred's Boethius*, ed. Sedgefield, pp. 40.6–41.6. For anthologies, see Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 132–3; Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, pp. 919–20; *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader*, ed. Whitelock, pp. 15–16.

wholly anachronistic as an analysis by Boethius. But as far as the Anglo-Saxon reader is concerned it is spoken by the prisoner Boethius, and it comes just five pages after a passage in which Wisdom has addressed the speaker directly in his Boethius role, referring to ‘your ancestors the Roman senators’;²⁵ there is nothing in between to suggest a change of identification. The anthologies give the impression that Alfred is speaking directly to his subjects on the problems of government, but in context there is an uneasy relationship between the sense (or at least *our* sense) of the translator’s own voice bursting through and the drama of the historical or fictional Boethius who is apparently making the argument here. Were Anglo-Saxon readers meant to assume the authority of Boethius the late Antique author behind this theory of government, while recognising its relevance to their own specific world? Or were they to read it as part of the personal drama, something which someone in Boethius’s position (a politician dismissed from his post and out of favour) would say if faced with Wisdom’s arguments? Or were they to suppose that it had the authority of the King Alfred who is identified as translator in the preface, despite the fictionalised presentation? This is particularly important because the passage is a critique of the Boethian philosophy, the one moment in the Alfredian text when the narrator bites back at Wisdom and challenges his views, pressing for a more pragmatic, this-worldly view of the human condition, and it is the strongest and most explicit expression of an undercurrent of challenge or qualification to the Stoic arguments of the Latin text which runs through the Old English work. Alfred seems to be using the Boethian voice and persona to mount a challenge to the fundamental arguments of Boethius the writer and philosopher (rather as, some six centuries later, Malory would invoke a fictionalised French source to repudiate the actual French tradition about the end of Arthur’s knights).²⁶

In fictionalising Boethius, ironising Wisdom, radically changing Wisdom’s arguments and, in this case, taking issue, in the voice of Boethius, with the main thrust of Wisdom’s views, while all the time maintaining and strengthening the fiction that this is a work of the

²⁵ *King Alfred’s Boethius*, ed. Sedgefield, pp. 34–5.

²⁶ *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. E. Vinaver, rev. P. J. C. Field, 3 vols, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1990), III, 1260.

sixth century, Alfred shows a remarkably confident, one might even say cavalier, belief in his right as author to remake the original text and to objectify it and its original author as products of their time and circumstance. We are still further from the simple acceptance of late Roman wisdom which the preface to ‘The Pastoral Care’ had seemed to suggest.

Soliloquies

It is in the Old English ‘Soliloquies’ that these questions of authority are most sharply raised; in many ways textual authority is a major concern of the work. As we have seen, the issue of sources and ancient authors and the Old English author’s relation to them is raised immediately in the preface, with its imagery of collecting timber from the forest to build a house. But when the work proper begins after the preface, Alfred seems to have reverted to the simpler model suggested by the preface to ‘The Pastoral Care’. He tells us that Augustine wrote a work in two books called *Soliloquia*, concerning his own reflections on the nature of the self and God, and proceeds apparently to give us that text in English.²⁷ That Augustine, not Alfred, is firmly the author and narrator of the Old English text – that it is, as it were, Augustine’s house which we are viewing or inhabiting, not Alfred’s – seems to be confirmed for the reader by several striking passages within the work. So in Book I Reason refers to ‘your servant Alippius’, a phrase which identifies the narrator as Augustine, not Alfred.²⁸ The narrator says of himself that he is thirty-three years old and has long forsaken notions of wealth and marriage, and he seems to identify himself as a priest.²⁹ Both of these passages are taken over from the Latin original, but the identification of the narrator and author as Augustine is more imaginatively and originally stressed in Book II. Reason tries to argue that one cannot deduce everything from personal experience and ratiocination and that there are things which one just has to believe, about God and immortality for instance, on the testimony of others, notably Christ himself and the apostles.

²⁷ *King Alfred’s Soliloquies*, ed. and trans. Carnicelli, p. 48.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 58.7. Alfred here misinterpreted Augustine’s earlier reference to his friend Alippius.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 72.

Then she gives an imaginative and personal analogy. You have a lord, the Emperor Honorius, she says to the author-narrator; you trust Honorius absolutely and are happy to believe anything which Honorius tells you, or indeed anything which friends at his court tell you, even though you have not seen it yourself. Honorius is a very good man, and his father the Emperor Theodosius was even better. But if you trust what Honorius tells you, how much more ought you to believe what you are told by Christ, the greatest of lords, and his father.³⁰

Ða cwæð heo: “Hwæt, ic wat þæt ðu hefst ðone hlaford nu todæg ðe þu treowast æt elcum þingum bet þonne þe siluum, and swa hefð eac manig esne ðara þe unricran hlaford hefð þonne ðu hefst; and ic wat þæt ðu hæfst æac manige freond þara þe ðu genoh wel truwest, þeah ðu him ealles swa wel ne truige swa ðu ðinum hlaforde dest. Hu þincð þe nu gyf se þin hlaford ðe hwilc spel segð þara ðe þu nefre ær ne geherdest, oððe he þe segð þæt he hwethwugu gesawe þæs þe ðu nefre ne gesawe? Ðincð þe hweðer þe awuht æt his segene tweoge, forðam þu hyt self ne gesawe?”

Ða cweð ic: “Nese, la nese, nis nan to ðam ungelyfedlic spel, gyf he hyt segð, þæt ic hym ne gelife.” ...

Ða cwæð heo: “Ic gehire nu þæt ðu gelyfst þinum hlaforde bet ðonne þe selfum Ac ic wolde þæt þu me sedest hweðer þe ðince Honorius, Þeodosius sunu, wisra oððe unleasera þonne Crist, Godes sunu.”

Ða cweð ic: “Nese, la nese, ne nawer neah. ... Honorius is swiðe god, þeah his feder betere were; he wes swiðe æfest and swiðe rædfast and swiðe rihte mines hlaforde kynnes, and swa is se þe þær gyt lufað. Hi ic wille wyrðian swa swa man worldhlaford sceal, and þe oðre ðe þu er embe sprece, swa swa heora hlaforde, and swa man þone kyng sceal, þe byð kyng ealra kcynga and ealra gesceafta scypend and wealdend.”

Ða cwæð heo: “Nu ic gehyre þæt þe licað se ælmihtiga god bet þonne Þeodosius, and Crist, godes sunu, bet ðonne Honorius, Þeodosius sunu. ...

... Nu þu geherst hwæt Crist cwæð and hys þegnas, and ic geherde ær þæt þu nawuht ne tweodast ymbe Honorius segene and hys þegna. Hwi tweost ðu þonne ymbe Cristes, godes sunu, and ymbe hera þegna sæcgena, þe hy selfe to sprecon?”

‘Then [Reason] said: “Now, I know that you have at present a lord whom you trust in all matters better than yourself, and so have many retainers who have less powerful lords than you have; and I know that you also have many friends

³⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 87.18–89.15. (The translation is my own.)

whom you trust well enough, although you do not trust them as well as you do your lord. Now how does it seem to you if your lord tells you some news which you have never heard before, or he tells you that he has seen something which you have never seen? Would you doubt his words, because you yourself hadn't seen it?"

Then I said: "No, no, there is no story so incredible that I would not believe him if he tells it to me." ...

Then she said: "I hear now that you believe your lord more than yourself. ... But I would like you to tell me whether Honorius the son of Theodosius seems to you wiser or more truthful than Christ the son of God?"

Then I said: "No, no, nowhere near it. ... Honorius is very good, although his father was better; he was very virtuous and very wise and very directly of my lord's lineage (?), and so is he who still lives. I would wish to honour them as one ought to honour a worldly lord, and I would wish to honour those others, of whom you spoke before, as their lords, and as one ought to honour the king who is king of all kings and creator and ruler of all creatures."

Then she said: "Now I hear that you like the almighty God better than Theodosius, and Christ the son of God better than Honorius the son of Theodosius. ... Now you hear what Christ and his thegns said, and I heard previously that you did not have any doubts about the words of Honorius and his thegns. Why then do you have any doubt about the testimonies of Christ, God's son, and their thegns, which they speak on this matter?"

Four things are important about this curious passage.

1. By its reference to the Emperor Honorius and the narrator's close personal relationship to him it reminds the Anglo-Saxon reader very firmly that the narrator (if not the author) of the Old English text is Augustine, writing from a particular historical context in the early fifth century (Honorius reigned 395–423).
2. It is nevertheless an entirely fictional passage invented by the Old English author; it was not written by Augustine and does not in fact carry any of the authority of Augustine which it appears to claim.
3. It uses an analogy with the personal circumstances of Augustine as an argument for the importance of relying on the testimony of others about reality and truth, and is thus closely related to the whole issue of textual authority – and yet it is a falsification, or at least a fictionalisation.
4. Most important of all, it forms part of a sustained critique of the whole methodology of Augustine's own text. The *raison d'être* of Augustine's *Soliloquia*, as Augustine himself pointed out in Book

II.14, was an attempt to discover truths by logical deduction from personal experience and introspection and self-questioning. The passage on Honorius is part of a new argument which rejects all this introspection and dialectic in favour of reliance on the testimony of trusted authority, and especially the Scriptures. Later on in his life Augustine did begin to articulate such arguments about the need to rely on the authority of others in matters of faith,³¹ but not at the early date when he wrote the *Soliloquia*, when he was still a philosopher more than a Christian; Stoic logic is the method of Augustine's *Soliloquia* and its sequel, *De immortalitate animae*, 'On the Immortality of the Soul'. The questioning of Augustine's reliance on dialectical technique had begun already quite early in Book I of the Old English 'Soliloquies', with another famous Alfredian anthology-piece, the brief passage about trusting in one's lord's written message and his seal, which is an implicit metaphor for the Scriptures.³² Now it is developed at length and in evident opposition to the failed methodology of Augustine's own *Soliloquia*. As in his Boethius but far more boldly and imaginatively, Alfred has used the fictionalised persona of the original author to voice a critique of that author's own arguments.

The passage presents an argument about authority and faith. Why do we believe the things which we believe or think we know? How much do we rely on the testimony of others? Why do we trust them? For Anglo-Saxon readers it was also an apparent example of reliable, authoritative testimony, since the personal references strongly reinforce the claim that the arguments which they were reading were the work of Augustine, one of the great Fathers of the Church. But the fact that it is not his work, indeed that most of Book II is Alfred's own and not Augustine's, subverts its own arguments about the importance of trustworthy authority. Alfred's argument here may be valid – we do indeed take a lot on trust in our beliefs. But the form in which he casts the argument is deceptive, because it invites us to suppose that he is reproducing the views of a great authority of the past whom we have learnt to trust. We are in the world of Chaucer's fictitious

³¹ See especially his *De fide rerum inuisibilium*, ed. M. P. J. van den Hout, CCSL 46 (Turnhout, 1969).

³² *King Alfred's Soliloquies*, ed. and trans. Carnicelli, p. 62.22–7.

references to his author Lollius in ‘Troilus and Criseyde’ or Malory’s fictitious references to the French book as his source in his *Morte d’Arthur*, but with the additional complication that we are dealing with a work of philosophy which engages with the problems of authority, faith and trust.

Such issues become wonderfully problematic in the final book, the third. Augustine gave up after his second book and published the work incomplete, ending with a brief hint of what the next book would have dealt with. Rather presumptuously, one might suggest, Alfred decided to complete it for him, though without indicating to his readers that that is what he was doing. At the end of Alfred’s Book II, where he makes contact with the Latin text again briefly and finally, the narrator (who is presumably still to be identified with Augustine) says that he accepts that he and his understanding are immortal and that after death his mind will retain the powers which it has acquired, but he still wants to know whether his intelligence will be less or greater in the afterlife, or the same as it is in life. Reason says (and here the Alfredian text has finally severed contact with Augustine’s *Soliloquia*) that the narrator should look for the answer in the book called *De uidendo Deo*.³³

Ða cwæð heo: “Ic gehere nu hwæt þu woldest witan, ac ic hyt þe ne mæg myd fæawum weordum geseccan. Gyf þu hyt openlice witan wilt, þonne scealt þu hyt secan on þære bec þe we hatað *de uidendo Deo*. Seo boc is on englisc gehaten ‘be godes ansyne’. Ac beo nu godes modes, and smæa þæt þu nu leornodes, and uton buta byddan þonne þæt he unc gefultmige; forðam he gehet þæt he wolde fultmian ælcum þara þe to hym cleopode and rihtes wilnode; and he gehet butan ælcum tweon þæt he us getehte æfter þisse weorulde þæt we mehton ful gewislice witan fulne wisdom and ful soðfæstnesse. þæt þu meht gehyran micle openlicor on þære bec þe ic þe ær nemde, *de uidendo Deo*.” Hær endiað þa blostman þære æftran bec þe we hatað *Soliloquiorum*.

‘Then she said: “I hear now what you want to know, but I cannot explain it to you in a few words. If you wish to know it fully, then you must look for it in the book which we call *De uidendo Deo*, which is called ‘Concerning the Sight of God’ in English. But be of good heart now, and think about what you have now learnt, and let us both pray that [God] will help us; for He promised that He

³³ *Ibid.* p. 92.3–13.

would help everyone who called to Him and sought what is right; and He promised without any doubt that He would guide us after this life so that we could know with full certainty complete wisdom and complete truth. You can hear that much more clearly in the book which I mentioned before, *De uidendo Deo*.” Here end the blooms of the second book which we call Soliloquies.’

De uidendo Deo is a genuine text, probably by St Augustine, but it would be rather difficult for Augustine the narrator to take Reason’s advice and look it up since Augustine had not written it yet – at the time when Augustine wrote his *Soliloquia* it was still some thirty years ahead of him. Perhaps Alfred did not know that, since he locates Augustine’s *Soliloquia* in Honorius’s reign rather than in the time of Theodosius his father. But it must be a learned literary joke, anyway, for Reason to refer ‘Augustine’ the fictional narrator back to the writings of Augustine the author for the answer to a question which the narrator had asked.

Book II then ends, but Book III (which is entirely Alfred’s own invention) immediately repeats this reference to *De uidendo Deo*, in what has to be read as an amusing interchange.³⁴

Ða cwæð ic: “Nu þu hefst þa cwydas geendod þe þu of ðisum twam bocum alese, and næfst me gyt geandweard be ðam þe ic þe nu niehst acsode, þæt wæs, be minum gewitte. Ic þe acsode hweðer hyt, æfter þas lichaman gedale and þære sawle, weoxe, þe wanode, þe hyt ægðer dyde swa hyt ær dæð.” Ða cwæð heo: “Hu ne sæde ic þe ær þæt þu hyt sceolt secan on þære bec þe wit þa ymb sprecon? Leorna þa boc; þonne findest þu hyt þær.” Ða cwæð ic: “Me ne onhagað nu þa boc ealle to asmæaganne. Ac ic wolde þæt þu me ...”

‘Then I said: “Now you have finished the speeches which you took from these two books, and haven’t yet answered me about what I asked you last, that was, about my intelligence. I asked you whether, after the separation of the body and the soul, it would be greater or smaller or would do as it now does.” Then she said: “Did I not tell you before that you should look for that in the book which we talked about? Learn that book; then you will find the answer there.” Then I said: “It is not convenient for me to study all of that book. But I want you to tell

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 92.14–21. Carnicelli’s text of Book III incorporates the rearrangement urged in 1921 by Karl Jost, who argued that leaves had been dislocated in the exemplar of the only manuscript. I have argued elsewhere that the dislocation was still more extensive, and that further rearrangement is necessary; see my article, ‘Text and Eschatology in Book III of the Old English *Soliloquies*’, *Anglia* 121 (2003), 177–209.

me ...” [a lacuna intervenes].’

It is perhaps just as well that the narrator persisted in questioning Reason, since the book which they had talked about, Augustine’s *De uidento Deo*, would not in fact have said anything on this subject at all. The usual modern view is that Alfred was not very familiar with it and thought that it did deal with this subject, and so used this device to refer his readers to it;³⁵ but we need at least to entertain the possibility that this is another literary trope, a gesture at an authority which might seem to lie behind the following text but does not. As we shall see, a fair number of modern commentators have been misled by that trope.

These lines also raise the question of where Book III comes from within the fictive construct of the whole work. At the outset of the work Alfred has said that Augustine wrote two books about his internal self-questioning; he sets out to give a version of them in English (though without explicitly saying that he will do so); and he gives a brief conclusion at the end of each of them in the Old English text, so that attentive readers know at the end of Alfred’s Book II that they have reached the end of Augustine’s second and final book. But Book III carries straight on with this internal dialogue and begins with the I-figure saying to the authority-figure, presumably still Reason, “Now you have finished the speeches which you took from these two books, and haven’t yet answered me about what I asked you last”. But if the two books of Augustine have ended, where is a reader to suppose the rest to have come from, and who is speaking if Augustine’s own writing has now finished? Is he still Augustine, but now a fictional figure, no longer the persona of the real author? And in whose mind is this interior dialogue now supposed to be operating? How has Reason managed to get outside Augustine’s mind like this? And if this is no longer Augustine’s own reason which is speaking, what authority does it have for its arguments and assertions?

The question of where this last book comes from, Augustine or one of the other authorities mentioned in the preface, is eventually answered

³⁵ M. M. Gatch, ‘King Alfred’s Version of Augustine’s Soliloquia: Some Suggestions on its Rationale and Unity’, in *Studies in Earlier Old English Prose*, ed. Szarmach, pp. 17–45.

for the reader in the closing words of Book III: ‘Here end the discourses which King Alfred took from the book which we call ...’.³⁶ But with that word the only manuscript breaks off, at the end of a leaf. Is this an extraordinarily unfortunate coincidence? Or a joke on someone’s part? It is very worrying to look at the manuscript and see the way in which the scribe has used up space to get to the end of the leaf before he has to give us the crucial name. What the next words would have been, identifying the source, is hard to say. From Wülker through Endter to Carnicelli it has been customary to supply the words ‘on læden *de uidendo Deo*, and on englisc “be Godes ansiene”’: ‘the book which we call in Latin *De uidendo Deo* and in English “Concerning the Sight of God”’.³⁷ But as Jost was already pointing out in 1921, *De uidendo Deo* is not remotely the source for Book III, and the opening words of the book do not in fact claim that it is.³⁸ It is very difficult to say what it should be: the sources for Book III include probably Gregory’s *Dialogi* and one of his homilies, a couple of sentences from *De uidendo Deo*, perhaps an influence from Julian of Toledo’s *Prognosticon* and Augustine’s *De ciuitate Dei*, but nothing which could be signalled as the main source of the final book.³⁹ The safest guess is perhaps that the *explicit* (if it ever did continue) specified the *Soliloquia* of Augustine and if so was perhaps referring to the whole of the Old English text rather than just the third book. If so, and if it was an authorial *explicit*, it would have been a wicked piece of indirection, since there is nothing at all from Augustine’s *Soliloquia* in the last book. Either way, the point remains that Book III does not reveal what authority lies behind it, although it gives all

³⁶ ‘Hær endiað þa cwidas þe Ælfred kining alæs of þære bec þe we hatað on ...’: *King Alfred’s Soliloquies*, ed. and trans. Carnicelli, p. 97.17–18.

³⁷ See R. P. Wülker, ‘Über die angelsächsische Bearbeitung der Soliloquien Augustins’, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der angelsächsischen Litteratur* 4 (1877), 101–31; *König Alfreds des Grossen Bearbeitung der Soliloquien des Augustinus*, ed. W. Endter, *Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Prosa* 11 (Hamburg, 1922), p. 70; *King Alfred’s Soliloquies*, ed. and trans. Carnicelli, p. 97.

³⁸ K. Jost, ‘Zur Textkritik der altenglischen Soliloquienbearbeitung’, *Beiblatt zur Anglia* 31 (1920), 259–72, 280–90, and 32 (1921), 8–16, at pp. 260–1.

³⁹ For the sources see my article ‘Text and Eschatology’, and in more detail the records in the *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici* database at <http://fontes.english.ox.ac.uk/> or in *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici: A Register of Written Sources Used by Anglo-Saxon Authors [CD-ROM Version 1.1]*, ed. Fontes Anglo-Saxonici Project (Oxford, 2002).

the apparent signs of having authority behind it – in the continuation of the dialogue and in the wording of the *explicit*. We are left only with the authority of Alfred whose name appears at the end of the text – and of course left wondering whether that claim is as spurious as the claims to Augustinian authority for much of Book II and all of Book III.

The question of authority rumbles all the way through Book III. Reason apparently continues as the authority-figure but now abandons the dialectical style of argument from perception and experience which had dominated the earlier books and argues instead from authority. The human mind, she says, can perceive little in this life, and we have to speculate about what we cannot see. But there is nevertheless much which we can believe about the future, on the basis of what we are promised, and presumably she means Scriptural testimony since she eventually cites the story of Dives and Lazarus as evidence. Much of what she says about the afterlife is decidedly heterodox and the question of where it all comes from is an important one for modern commentators. The claims within the text that it has the support of many testimonies are decidedly troubling. But finally she triumphantly turns to the narrator and asks him whether he has now had a sufficient explanation of wisdom and the vision of God. The narrator agrees that he has, and sums up for us the whole question of faith and authority.⁴⁰

Ʒu tehtest me eac swa ungelygena gewittnesse swa ic nan oððer don ne mæg, bute ic næde scall hym gelifan. Forðam, gyf ic nanre wacran gewittnesse ne gelyfe, þonne wat ic swiðe lytel, oððe nanwiht. Hwæt wat ic buton þæt ic wilnie þæt we be gode witan swa sweotole swa we woldon? ... Ac ic silf næfre ne geseah oððe gehyrde þæt þæt me unsoðfæstran men sædon þonne þa wæron þe þæt sedon þæt wit þær ymb sint. Hu ne sceal ic nede oðer twegera: oððe sumum men gelifan, oððe nanum? Me þincð nu þæt ic wite hwa Romeburh timbrode, and æac feala oðra þincga þe ær urum dagum geweordon wæs, þa ic ne mæg æalla ariman. Nat ic no ði hwa Romeburh timbrede þe ic self hyt gesawe, ne furðum þæt nat hwilces cynnes ic eom, ne hwa min feder wæs oððe modor, buton be gesegenum. Ic wat þæt min fæder me gestriende, and min modor me

⁴⁰ *King Alfred's Soliloquies*, ed. and trans. Carnicelli, pp. 94.23–95.1, 97.3–13. (On the reconstruction which I have proposed in 'Text and Eschatology', this is a continuous sequence, close to the end of the whole work.)

gebær. Nat ic hyt na þy þæt ic hyt self gesawe, ac forði þe hyt man me sæde. Ne sædon hyt me þeah nane swa soðfeste men swa ðær weron ðe þæt sædon þe wit nu lange æfter spyredon, and þæh ic hys gelyfe.

‘You have taught me also such truthful testimonies that I can do nothing else but necessarily believe them. For if I were not to believe weaker witnesses [than those], I would know very little, or nothing. What do I know except that I desire that we should know about God as clearly as we wish? But I myself have seen or heard things which were told me by less truthful men than were those who told of what we are concerned with. I must believe either someone or no one. It seems to me now that I know who built Rome and also many other things which happened before our times, which I could not list in all. I do not know who built Rome because I saw it myself, or even what kin I am from, or who was my father or my mother, except by report. I know that my father begot me and my mother bore me. I do not know this because I saw it myself but because someone told me. But the people who told me were by no means as trustworthy as were those who told about the things which you and I have now for a long time enquired about, and yet I believe what they say.’

This, paradoxically, is the only passage in which Alfred does use the work which Reason had cited as an important authority at the beginning of the book, Augustine’s *De uidentio Deo*.⁴¹ It is an argument for the narrator to trust what Reason has told him, and presumably for the reader to trust the Augustine who has apparently created the text which Alfred has translated. But Augustine has not written Book III, Alfred has, and Reason has only said what Alfred causes her to say. The immediately subsequent remarks of Augustine in *De uidentio Deo*, though not used explicitly by Alfred, must have been seen by him and are important for an insight into his thinking on the question of authority.⁴²

‘We know these things on the word of others, and we have concluded that their testimony, at least in this field of information, is completely trustworthy. If we are sometimes led astray in such matters, either by believing that something is so when it is not so, or that it is not so when it is, we conclude that there is no danger so long as the matter is not contrary to that faith on which our devotion is founded. This preface of mine raises a question not yet formulated, but it

⁴¹ *King Alfred’s Soliloquies*, ed. and trans. Carnicelli, p. 107.

⁴² *Saint Augustine, Letters*, trans. W. Parsons, vol. III, *The Fathers of the Church* 20 (Washington, DC, 1953): letter 147, §5 (p. 174).

forewarns you and others who will read these words of the sort of judgement you should make, either of my writings or of anyone else's, lest you think that you know what you do not know, or rashly believe what you have neither perceived by the senses of your body or the gaze of your mind upon the evidence of the subject to be known, nor learned on the authority of the canonical Scriptures.'

If there is licence here for an author to write speculatively, there is also a reminder that whether readers believe what is presented to them in texts depends crucially on their estimate of the trustworthiness of the authority to whom those texts are ascribed – and the Old English 'Soliloquies' is decidedly untrustworthy in its identification of authority. The Old English 'Soliloquies' is, to return to the imagery of the preface, in large part Alfred's house not Augustine's; but there is a persistent implication that, in as much as Alfred took the timbers from a forest which is not a forest but an old city, the house retains some of the authority of those older houses.

We might sum up this whole analysis by saying that, on the one hand, the Alfredian authors appropriate to their own purposes the texts which they are supposedly translating, making them say and mean new things, radically so in the 'Soliloquies'; on the other, they work hard at developing the identity of the original author within the text, in ways which seem to lend the authority of Orosius, Boethius and Augustine to the Old English texts but also keep reminding Anglo-Saxon readers that these are the products of a particular time and situation in the past and that much water has passed under the bridge since then. We are here far closer to the description of his activity which Alfred gives in the preface to the Old English 'Soliloquies' than to that humble attempt to recover the past which he describes in the far more familiar preface to 'The Pastoral Care'. There is something very conscious and very bold about the frontal engagement with the ancient authorities which we see in Alfred's Boethius and especially his 'Soliloquies'. But there is also something very deliberate and audacious about the exploitation of authority-figures and the disruption of textual authority evident in the treatment of the authors as characters.

There seem to me to be at least three ways of explaining or contextualising the treatment of authority in these works.

1. The innocence-argument. We might say that the Alfredian writers had the greatest respect for the Latin authors, that they unconsciously developed and adapted their arguments and narratives to accord with their own understanding of actuality, without even realising most of the time how much they were differing or misunderstanding, and that they naturally attributed their version to the original authors and highlighted their presence within the work. See for instance Gatch's comment on the Old English 'Soliloquies': 'Alfred did not willfully alter Augustine, in other words, but read him in the light of his own learning and experience'.⁴³

2. The pragmatic or cynical argument. The translators were fully aware of how much they differed from their originals, and went out of their way to assert the responsibility of Orosius, Boethius and Augustine for the resulting vernacular works because they wished to persuade Anglo-Saxon readers to treat these latter-day texts as ancient and authoritative.

3. The ludic, or the literary, approach. One might argue that the Alfredian writers were engaged in a consciously imaginative or fictionalising activity, creating works which had their own dramatic autonomy; that they were not seriously (or fraudulently) claiming to represent their late Antique progenitors but appropriating them to create a body of Anglo-Saxon literature which explored ideas in an imagined setting which owed something to those progenitors and certainly acknowledged them but partly fictionalised them.

The functionalist reading of Alfredian discourse is strongly suggested by the urgent tones of Alfred's preface on the state of learning and the need for wisdom, and by Asser's sober emphases on Alfred's pursuit of learning.⁴⁴ The more playful or literary reading might be suggested by the metrical preface to the Old English Boethius, which tells us that Alfred turned the work into verse to make it more pleasant to read,⁴⁵ and by the preface to the 'Soliloquies' in which he seems to acknowledge that what he is doing is building his own house out of materials stolen from other men's houses. But

⁴³ Gatch, 'King Alfred's Version', p. 18.

⁴⁴ Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, ed. W. H. Stevenson (Oxford, 1904), translated by Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*. See especially §§76–9 and 87–9.

⁴⁵ *King Alfred's Boethius*, ed. Sedgefield, p. 151.

perhaps the strongest argument, at least for the ‘Soliloquies’, is to see the way in which Alfred sharpens the sense of dialogue and drama throughout the ‘Soliloquies’, in a way which contributes nothing to the argument but much to the sense of a dramatic and emotional debate of two individuals. We might say that, however the Alfredian writers would have explained their activity to others, what they were engaged in was an imaginative fictionalising on themes suggested by their progenitors. Consciously or not, they were engaged in a dialogue with the ancient authors, partly accepting, partly questioning, partly just wishing to enter into debate with them, and that sense of differentness from the old writers whom they were supposedly translating enters into the way in which they present and objectify them in their adaptations. In that case the rhetoric of King Alfred’s preface to ‘The Pastoral Care’ should be treated as imaginative fictionalising too. He and his circle were not reproducing the wisdom of the past, they were displacing it.