3. GILBERT OF POITIERS’S CONTEXTUAL THEORY OF MEANING AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF SECRECY

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Contemporary philosophers, at least those in the analytic tradition, usually begin their thinking about language by considering the most straightforward communicative situations. Special problems arise, not from the communicative context, but from what is attempted to be said. Suppose, for example, John remarks that the book on the table is red, when there is no book on the table; or Bertrand tells us that the present King of France is bald. Most twelfth-century and later medieval philosophers, looking to the early chapters of *On Interpretation* for the framework of their semantics, shared these priorities. A mark of this approach is how Aristotle explicitly concerns himself with spoken signs: written signs are significant only secondarily, through them. And, for most twelfth-century writers in this tradition, difficulties arise, as today, from the subject-matter: when, for example, one wants to say that Homer—though long dead—is a poet, or, that Man is an animal, if one holds that there is no such thing as the universal, animal.

Gilbert of Poitiers is an exception. He thinks about language from the perspective of a communicative situation which is doubly unstraightforward: that of the interpreter of a written text by an author long since dead; and of a text which, he claims, is deliberately written in such a way as not to be readily understood. As a result, Gilbert hardly at all engages in the type of semantic discussion which has led his near-contemporary, Peter Abelard, rightly or wrongly, to be compared to present-day philosophers of language.¹ Rather, he is led by his position as a textual interpreter towards what might be called a ‘contextual’ theory of meaning, in which

¹ Peter Abelard’s relation to contemporary philosophy of language has been the subject of an interesting debate between Peter King and Christopher Martin: see C. J. Martin, ‘Imposition and Essence: What’s new in Abelard’s theory of meaning’, in T. Shimizu and C. Burnett (eds.), *The Word in Medieval Logic, Theology and Psychology* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), pp. 173–214. This debate is discussed in my *Abelard in Four Dimensions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, forthcoming). Abelard does indeed stress the importance of context for understanding words, but he is thinking in terms of the context of a single sentence, and the application of general rules not a resort to the author’s mind. There is, however, some similarity between Gilbert’s approach to Boethius and Abelard’s
the whole context of a passage needs to be considered in order to discern the author's intended sense. But this theory is developed and used by Gilbert in a special and unexpected way as a result of the view that the learned have a duty not just to discover, but also to hide, truths—a hermeneutics of secrecy. Gilbert's position as a pioneer of the distinction between ordinary verbal meaning and the intended authorial sense has been recognized. It has not, however, been properly linked to his position—indeed his predicament—as an exegete, nor therefore to the hermeneutics of secrecy. The aim of the following pages is to show these links and their consequences in Gilbert's thinking about language and his way of writing.

*How Gilbert Went about Commenting on the Opuscula sacra*

The text which set Gilbert off on his unusual semantic path is by Boethius, his *Opuscula sacra*. Gilbert finished his commentary on it by 1148, when he successfully defended his views against Bernard of Clairvaux's attack at the Council of Rheims. Earlier he had written two other commentaries that survive, one on the Psalms, probably from before 1117, and one on the Pauline Epistles, from ca. 1135. But it is in the commentary on the *Opuscula sacra* alone that Gilbert's distinctive philosophical ideas are found.

Given that, from the time of the Psalms commentary, Gilbert seems to have concentrated on teaching sacred doctrine, it is not surprising that he should have made this text the vehicle for his thinking about logic, metaphysics and language, as well as God. Boethius's set of *Opuscula* was the one theological work, other than the Bible, which was, and had long been, studied as a school text, subjected to extensive glossing as its contents were explained, sentence by sentence. For teachers who had been

claim to uncover the *inuolucra* in the texts of Plato and other ancient authors so as to reveal what they wished to say about the Trinity.

2 See below, n. 14, for the literature.


5 A 'commentary'—really collected glosses—on the *Opuscula* was edited by E. K. Rand, *Johannes Scottus* (Munich: Beck, 1906; repr. Frankfurt: Minerva, 1966), and attributed to