Semantics and Metaphysics in Gilbert of Poitiers

A Chapter of Twelfth-Century Platonism (2)*

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2 Gilbert's View of Transcendent Reality

Gilbert's world consists of quite a lot of singular subsistent objects which owe their being and 'being-a-something' to a collection of forms, both subsistental and accidental. Well, God has created this world after what in the Platonic tradition was called the 'exemplary Forms'. For Gilbert, creation and concretion are two complementary notions which play an important role in his ontology. Creation is the reception of a total form or collection of subsistentiae; it is also called generation. As a natural process it amounts to 'beginning to be-of-a-certain-kind'.

2.1 Creation and Concretion

Creation and generation primarily concern the substantial (or total) form (collection of subsistentiae) whereas the accidental forms ('accidentia' in Porretan usage) come into being qua as many adaptations to the subsistentiae. Nielsen seems to be wrong to oppose concretion against creation (and generation) in such a way that concretion would only relate to the coming into existence (generation) of accidental forms. To my mind, creation and concretion are materially the same (as far as the created world is concerned. There is a formal difference between the two, however: 'creatio' refers to the production resulting from God's activity ('causation out of nothing'), whereas 'concretio' refers to the process by which participated forms become embodied in matter. Here are some of the basic texts:

* Part (1) is found in this Journal, 26 (1988), 73-112. 1 I prefer this to Nielsen's rendering (p. 69): 'begins to belong to a genus', where alicuius is ignored and, more importantly, 'genus' is taken in its extensional rather than its intensional sense.
Heb. 199,19-20: omnia naturalia non modo creata sed etiam concreta sunt.

All natural things are not only created but also solidified ['enmattered'].

Trin. 87,56-9: multa sunt que vocantur 'forme', ut corporum figure et alia que in subsistentibus creatione seu concretione funt; quibus id cui insunt, aut aliquid est aut aliquid esse doctrine ordine demonstratur.

There are many things which are called 'forms', such as bodily figures and other things which originate in subsistents by creation or concretion; <things> due to which that in which they inhere either 'is-a-something' or is demonstrated to 'be-a-something' through an orderly learned argument.

Ibid. 88,87-8: .... ERIS FIGURAM que, cum lapis solvitur calore, in ipso creatur.

.... the shape of bronze, which originates in a stone when the latter is dissolved by heat.

Eut. 255,74-256,78: Generatio namque est ingressus in substantiam. Ideoque quicquid per creationem incipit alicuius generis esse, id recte dicitur 'generari'. Quod utique omnibus temporalibus et perpetuis convenit. Hec enim omnia non semper fuerunt. Ideoque quicquid sequendum quodlibet genus sunt, [sc. hec omnia] per generationem hoc esse cepertur.

Generation is indeed the first step on the road to substance. Hence whatever, due to creation, begins to be of some generic nature, is truly said 'to be generated'. This at least happens to all temporal and perpetual things, for all these have not always been. Therefore, whatever they are and of whatever genus, they had begun to be this genus through generation.

Trin. 84,54-6: Creatio namque subsistentiam inesse facit ut cui inest ab ea aliquid sit. Concretio vero eodem subsistentie naturas posterioris rationis accommodat ut, cui cum illâ insunt, simplex non sit.

For creation causes a subsistential form to inhere <in something> so that that in which it inhere 'is-a-something' due to it [viz. that form]. Concretion, on the other hand, accommodates the same subsistential form with some natures of secondary rank so that that in which they inhere together with that <form> is not an incomposite.

It should be noted in this connection that the nature posterioris rationis mentioned above are not necessarily accidental forms, as Nielsen seems to assume. This may be gathered from Trin. 89,18-9 where Gilbert speaks of 'posterioris rationis naturas aliquas vel se componentes vel sibi adiacentes': it is quite clear in this context that by 'nature componentes' Gilbert means subsistential forms. In fact, by our author explicitly speaks of the concretion of genus and difference, as well as of the creation of accidents:

Trin. 144,79-81: omne subsistens multorum quibus est, idest generis et differentie et accidentis, concretione subsistit.

Each subsistent subsists due to the concretion of the multitude of constituents by which it is, viz. genus, differentia and accident.