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ON POPULAR PLATONISM: GIOVANNI PICO WITH ELIA DEL  
MEDIGO AGAINST MARSILIO FICINO

Francesco Petrarca, in his invective *On His Own Ignorance and that of Many Others*, discusses at length the teachings of ancient philosophers, including Aristotle and Plato, relying heavily on Cicero's *De natura deorum*. At one point, he declares:

[Cicero] labored to compose things that I believe should never have been written. I wouldn't believe they should be read either, except that reading and understanding such trifles about the gods awaken our love for true divinity and the one God, and that, as we read, our contempt for foreign superstition awakes reverence for our religion in our minds.<sup>1</sup>

What appears well in accord with his Augustinian Christian piety throughout his work can also be understood as an attempt at damage control made necessary by his own endeavor to propagate ancient wisdom. Befriending antiquity exposes the reader to pagan theologies and calls for a firm belief in Christianity. Little more than one hundred years later, the revival of ancient and non-Christian wisdom has brought humanists to a crisis, of which the controversy between Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico, his *complatonicus*, is paramount. This crisis still deserves interpretation because it determines both our view on Renaissance Platonism and its impact on modern philosophy. Here, I want to present the Florentine quarrel about Platonic Love from Pico's perspective.

The year 1486 saw Giovanni Pico particularly busy. He had recently returned from Paris and was preparing his great council or disputation of 900 theses in Rome; so he was writing his *Oratio* that would become his most famous work, and he was, of course, collecting the material for his 900 theses. For this purpose, he met for further briefings with his teacher of Averroist Aristotelianism, Elia del Medigo. On his way to Rome in early May 1486, he found time and energy to kidnap Margherita, the wife of Giuliano Mariotto dei Medici. However, after the fight and his humiliating arrest that ensued, he remembered his allegiance to the saintly Savonarola and concentrated all his vigor on studies of Hebrew, the Qur'an, and other reading.<sup>2</sup> In addition to all this - as his editor and nephew Gianfrancesco Pico reported - "he also wrote something Platonic, in vernacular language, in which one finds much to clarify

<sup>1</sup> Francesco Petrarca, *Invectives*, ed. and transl. David Marsh, Cambridge/London 2003, p. 295: *On His Own Ignorance* IV, § 83.

<sup>2</sup> This is how Garin represents Pico's conversion, Eugenio Garin, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Vita e dottrina*, Florence: Le Monnier, 1937, p. 25-27.

the olden theology (*priscorum Theologiam*), i.e. much of the abstruse opinions of the sages strewn in enigmas and riddles (*scirpis*<sup>3</sup>). Perhaps - leisure permitting - I will try and translate this into Latin, in order that such a man's egregious teaching may not become available to some vulgar people."<sup>4</sup> Gianfrancesco is evidently referring to Giovanni's *Commento sopra una canzona de amore*. His remark is as ambivalent as Giovanni's work: On the one hand, he appreciates its purpose to set some of the pagan theology in order; on the other hand, he still deems it inappropriate for the masses and therefore regrets that it was composed in Italian.

Girolamo Benivieni, himself the author of the *Canzona* on which Pico commented, reports to have been reluctant to publish this book after Pico's death. The reasons he pondered were certainly the same that irritated the nephew, mainly the problem, whether Pico's text was compatible with Christian doctrine. Such concern is plausible, for Girolamo Benivieni, his brother Domenico, and Giovanni Pico were all in some way involved with the Florentine religious reformer Girolamo Savonarola.<sup>5</sup> Girolamo Benivieni's version of the origin of the poem and the comment is:<sup>6</sup> Benivieni had "read with pleasure" (*amenissima letione*) the learned commentary on Plato's *Symposium* by Marsilio Ficino and thus felt invited to "condense in a few stanzas what Ficino had explained on many pages and in most elegant style". Readers interested in intertextuality will observe how Benivieni, by means of modesty, reduces his responsibility for the contents of his own poem. This *Canzona* inspired Pico to add his "learned and elegant as well as rich" commentary (*non manco dotta et elegante, che copiosa interpretatione*: i.e. he re-expands the condensed poetic doctrine). But doubts arose. Actually, both Pico and Benivieni reconsidered the poem, and they both believed that Pico jotted down his commentary not in the way the matter deserves but rather out of "tender and particular affection" (*tenera et singular affetione*) to the poet and that both - once "the spirit and fervor" in which they had written subsided - doubted it appropriate to treat heavenly love in the Platonic mood rather than as Christians. Consequently,

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Aulus Gellius, *Noct. Att.* 12, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *De ente et uno*, in *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno e scritti vari*, ed. Eugenio Garin, Florence: Vallecchi, 1942, p. 13 [cited as Pico, *Scritti*, 1942]. Quoted from Gianfrancesco Pico's biography of Giovanni in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Opera omnia*, Basel: Henricpetri, 1572, reprinted Turin: Bottega d'Erasmus, 1971, fol. \*4r [cited as Pico, *Opera*]. Unless cited otherwise, translations are mine.

<sup>5</sup> Caterina Re, *Girolamo Benivieni Fiorentino*, Città di Castello: Lapi, 1906, part 1, chapters 4-5. Lorenzo Polizotto, "Domenico Benivieni and the Radicalization of the Savonarolan Movement", in Conal Condren and Roslyn Pesman Cooper (ed.s), *Alto polo - a volume of Italian Renaissance studies*, Sydney: University of Sydney, 1982, pp. 99-117, 100 f.. Cf. Gian Carlo Garfagnini, "Domenico Benivieni: Filosofia e spiritualità", in Paolo Viti (ed.), *Il capitolo di San Lorenzo nel Quattrocento*, Florence: Olschki, 206, pp. 273-292.

<sup>6</sup> Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Opera omnia*, Basel: Henricpetri, 1572, reprinted Turin: Bottega d'Erasmus, 1971, p. 733.

they refrained from publishing the twin writings unless they could "reform" it from a Platonic into a Christian text.<sup>7</sup>

A minor problem is hidden in this narrative, for Pico had explained his commentary to Domenico Benivieni with a letter, dated November 10, 1486, assuring that Girolamo was right in caring for Pico's health but not in praising that *Commentary*: it was "nothing to get excited about. I wrote it when I was bored [*ociosi*] and had nothing else to do, as a way of relaxing my mind, not of exciting it." However, Pico continues this apparent gesture of modesty by announcing: "It is only a prologue to the Commentary on Plato's *Symposium* which I am planning to write."<sup>8</sup> Two biographical facts should be taken into consideration in this context. First, Domenico Benivieni was mentioned in the dedication of Pico's 1491 treatise *De ente et uno*, as one who had (probably) attended discussions about the compatibility of Plato and Aristotle, together with Lorenzo de' Medici and Angelo Poliziano - a debate that took Ficino's Platonism to task; second, Girolamo had attended discussions on the same subject at San Marco in Florence in the presence of Savonarola.<sup>9</sup> In other words, with this canzone and its commentary the trio was plotting against Ficino - and this not only after the disaster of the failed disputation in Rome in early 1487, or at the time of *De ente et uno*, but already in 1486.

Benivieni's narrative justifies the publication of the comment with public pressure on releasing the book after Pico's premature death, Benivieni himself now relying upon the discretion and the sound Christianity of the readers. Benivieni explains his deliberations in a very long and convoluted sentence, in which he invokes Thomas Aquinas, whose authority should be able to restrain the errors of the Nobleman - "if one can speak of errors". Also, he adds as a disclaimer that the title of the commentary expressly indicates that "Canzona et commento" are written not according to the Catholic truth but rather in the mind and meaning of the Platonists. Finally, this text gives an important insight into the core of this great philosopher, as Benivieni promises, and with that he defers responsibility onto his late friend.<sup>10</sup>

From these two accounts on Pico's *Commento* by the nephew and the friend, we gather quite a number of important clues to interpretation. In the Florentine environment, it was evidently more scandalous to write in Italian than in Latin when it came to the wisdom of the ancients. It was, generally,

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.: "... nacque nelli animi nostri qualche ombra [d]i dubitatione se era conveniente a uomo professore della legge di Christo, volendo lui trattar[e] di Amore massime celeste, et divino, tratarne come Platonico, et non come Christiano pensamo che fussi bene sospendere la publicatione di tale opera, almeno sino ad tanto che noi vedessimo se lei per qualche reformatione potessi di Platonica diventare Christiana."

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 382; English translation taken from the Introduction in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Commentary on a Canzone of Benivieni*, trans. by Sears Jayne, New York: Lang, 1984, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Pico, *Scritti*, 1942, p. 386. Roberto Ridolfi, *Vita di Girolamo Savonarola*, Florence: Sansoni, 1981, p. 146: Savonarola is said to have disdained both ancients.

<sup>10</sup> Pico, *Opera*, p. 733.

dubious to treat such matters as divine love with strong reliance on pagan philosophy. Nevertheless, Pico's achievement in doing so was outstanding both as an elaboration of his thought and for the correct interpretation of the pagan mysteries. It is noteworthy that Gianfrancesco Pico continues his report with praising his uncle's merits in his "general method of commenting", mainly the Holy Scriptures.<sup>11</sup> On a biographical note, we learn that Pico not only wrote his *Commento* during or after his chivalric adventure with Margherita, he also was inspired by an erotic bond with Benivieni, a bond not much different from what Marsilio Ficino advocated in his commentary on the *Symposium*, which, incidentally, was to be reinterpreted in Pico's commentary. However, in the first place Benivieni cautions the reader that such a Platonic treatment of divine love might be harmful to the Christian feelings of the readership, even more, that it elaborates on the contrast between these two approaches, which becomes evident in the text. My contention is that in reality this is the main thrust of the *Commento* as a whole. This interpretation would mean that the year 1486, with the publication of the *Oratio* and the *900 Theses*, probably marked Pico's endeavor to correct, bend, or divert Florentine Platonism in a way that Christian truth would not suffer harm from ancient, pre-Christian, and unchristian philosophizing. Phrased otherwise, when Benivieni trusts that the readers will discern the spirit that drives Pico's exposition, he invites us to take a critical look at the Platonic interpretation of love and to judge to what extent it may be compatible with Christian theology, mainly of Thomistic branding.

What Benivieni does not say is that he himself had already "reformed" the commentary by erasing all invectives against Marsilio Ficino that occur throughout the text.<sup>12</sup> Now, Ficino's *De amore* had been the work that had prompted the *Canzona*. Was the poet, then, protecting the late head of the Platonic Academy? Given the fact that he emphasized his condensing and shortening Ficino's theory and Pico's new elaboration of the poem, he cuts his own ties that once bound him to Ficino and endorses Pico's interpretation.

Thus, we are about to discover another riddle in addition to the many questions that surround Pico's prolific writing in this time: His writing and planning commentaries on Platonic love in vernacular and his competing with Ficino were part of the hazardous project to challenge all intellectuals of his time in Rome and to set up a new style of philosophizing and a new approach to Christian and non-Christian sources. Not only the *Oratio* and the *900 Theses* are involved, but also *De ente et uno*, because this short text was the most blatant attack on Ficinian Platonism, and also *Heptaplus*, because here many of the motives of the *Oratio* and of the *Commento* are repeated and developed further. Since the *Commento* has survived in rather sketchy prints and manuscripts and since the style of writing sometimes sounds clumsy due to occa-

<sup>11</sup> Pico, *Opera*, fol. \*4v.

<sup>12</sup> Pico, *Scritti*, 1942, pp. 13-15.

sional scholastic formulas and interspersed Latinisms, it has remained relatively neglected in Pico studies, but it might turn out to be a key to interpreting the major intentions of the author.

Since Pico's teacher, Elia del Medigo, was also involved in his various projects, a letter of his, written in 1485, lends insight into some philosophical issues that troubled Pico at that time. After acknowledging having received from Pico scabies, but also a horse, Elia del Medigo discloses for the first time, as he says, his personal view on Cabala. Cabala, as we well know, was to be the major news in the *Oratio* and in the *900 Theses*. Pico not only included it in his broad survey of global wisdom, he also seems to have put all his spiritual hope in this ancient mysticism because it claimed to be the true tradition of the Word of God into mankind, and it fostered an understanding of the human soul within the cosmos that most precisely expressed Pico's view of the dignity of man.<sup>13</sup> Elia remarks<sup>14</sup>:

Since you are so busy with "this blessed Cabala" (*isto benicto Chabala*), let me tell you that in my Hebrew commentary on [Averroes'] *De substantia orbis* I spoke about the spiritual power (*de virtute spirituali*). And what I have to say is unknown to all who deal with it. (...) [The cabalists] believe that in this world there are beings of a lower degree (*gradus*) than the degree of the glorious God, who is called the Infinite, and these flow - that is: they are not made nor produced (*sunt fluxa, non dico facta vel producta ab illo*) - from Him, who is, named the Infinite. These have various degrees. The higher grade of these is above the movers of the heavens and the visible bodies in heaven. The order in which the produced beings are produced and maintained within the order is this, namely by the Sephiroth, i.e. numberings. Thus they call these 'flowed from the Infinite'. For they believe that in the Infinite there is no thinking or apprehension, and also no terminus or determination, since it is an intellectual disposition. One cannot speak about will, intention or thinking in it and generally of no disposition. So it is impossible that [thinking] is a thing that comes or flows (*proveniens seu fluxa*) out of it, i.e., the Infinite. The first that flowed from it (the Infinite) are the beings mentioned, according to the degrees which one calls Sephiroth, as I said, and these are agents by virtue of God, whom they call Infinite, and by the flux that they obtain from Him, and they are identical by His virtue, because they, the Sephiroth, depend on Him and have flown from Him, that is the Infinite. According to them, the order we find in the world is that of the Sephiroth. The First, however, that is called the Infinite, of this one can assert no disposition or positive property; they even refrain from calling it intellect, as also Averroes observes in his *Destructio destructionum* 4, namely that Plato and the Platonists do not want to call God an intellect or maintain that He is an intellect.

This is a very interesting letter, first because its awkward wording conveys authenticity of an intellectual more familiar with Hebrew than with Latin ter-

<sup>13</sup> See Paul Richard Blum, "Pico, Theology, and the Church", in Michael V. Dougherty (ed.), *Pico della Mirandola. New Essays*, Cambridge: University Press, 2008 (forthcoming), chapter 3.

<sup>14</sup> Elia's letter to Pico in Pico, *Scritti*, 1942, pp. 68-71; the spelling is Elia's.

minology. He evidently struggles with transforming cabalistic stereotypes of expression into Latin, thus the repetitive insistence on 'the Infinite' as the name of God. If I am right, by "Infinite" he refers to the En Soph. But for anyone accustomed to humanist elegance, as Pico was, the insistence on the Infinite as a name must sound like an invitation to translate this epithet into whatever terminology one prefers, lest the ineffability be safeguarded.

Second, Elia intends to clarify, for the first time, what people dealing with Cabala tend to misunderstand. Even if Elia does not identify himself as a cabalist, he cannot possibly have had his fellow Jews in mind, but he must mean to correct outsiders who, like Pico, try to come to grips with it. He gives a summary of the relation between the En Soph, the Sephiroth, and the visible World and concludes with an issue that Latin philosophers might know well enough, namely Averroes' take on Platonism in defining God. Thus Elia affords Pico with a fine hermeneutics of the Infinite and the World. The structure of the World as such, expressed in the Sephiroth, and easily convertible into Pythagorean numbers, is not a product of the Divine Mind - as Christian Platonists tend to assume - but rather an efflux of God, who for want of differentiation (disposition) is by no means a mind.

Such is the interpretation available to a sound Christian familiar with Platonism. And Elia's contention is that this God - truly invisible, super-essential, undivided, independent - is the same in Averroes, Plato, and the Cabala. Whether this is a correct rendering of the Cabala, I cannot assess, but what is striking is that this very view is the main message in Pico and that this message is at odds with Ficino.

Let us remember, this letter came during Pico's preparation for the great revelation of cabalistic wisdom in his Roman disputation and while he was commenting on Benivieni's rendering of Ficinian love. It may, then, help reading Pico's polemics against Ficino in his *Commentary* on Benivieni.

One interesting example for Pico's disagreement is the interpretation of Caelus-Saturnus-Jupiter.<sup>15</sup> According to Pico, Saturnus's castrating Caelus symbolizes that, indeed, the Highest God is inactive in as much as his testicles fall into the water thus giving birth to Venus, i.e. fertilizing the world. In one remark against Ficino only recently discovered, Pico argues that it is incoherent to understand such emasculation as a diminishing of perfection: First, that is not the meaning of castration; then, not Caelus but his influence would have been castrated; and third, one would have to say that also Jupiter castrates Saturnus.<sup>16</sup>

Pico is criticizing the fact that in the Ficinian model, emanation may be understood as a gradual decay of power and dignity. Keeping in mind Elia's rendering of the Sephiroth as those that guarantee the integrity of God and still

<sup>15</sup> *Commento* II 20, in Pico, *Scritti*, 1942, p. 511 f.; transl. Jayne: II 21, pp. 115-117.

<sup>16</sup> Franco Bacchelli, *Giovanni Pico e Pier Leone da Spoleto. Tra filosofia dell'amore e tradizione cabalistica*, Florence: Olschki, 2001, p. 118, fram. 9.

derive their being and the being of the material world from God without admitting the thought of decay, it is obvious that Pico follows the same strategy: creation does not exhaust the creator. Pico even warns that the misunderstanding by "a certain Platonist" is equivalent to Manicheism.<sup>17</sup> He renders the castration with Elia's term "influxo"<sup>18</sup>, i.e., the influx of the plenitude of ideas: "... everything which Uranus [Caelus] communicates to Saturn, that is the plenitude of the Ideas, which descends from God into the Angelic Mind, is represented by the testicles of Uranus."<sup>19</sup>

One may use the agreement between Pico's critique of Neoplatonist emanation and Elia's critique of misrepresented cabalism as proof that Pico was essentially an Averroist (provided that Elia was a faithful commentator on Averroes) - but that's not the point. The thrust of both arguments is directed against downsizing the mystery of creation.

Elia's critique implies yet another assumption that bears on the meaning of Christian Platonism: As the Cabalistic view is so to say tripartite, God-Sephiroth-World, so has the Platonic world to consist of at least three levels, parallel to Caelus-Saturn-Giove: God creates one and only one creature, which is merely intellectual or spiritual and that creates all other finite beings. The reasoning behind this model seems to be clear: Only if the finite world is created, or structured, by something eternal, which contains the structure (ideas) of this world, only then God is not affected by the finiteness of His creature, and - even more importantly - only then the world is not pervaded by God. This intermediate level - name it Sephiroth, Angelic Mind, First Created - keeps world and God apart and together. It is the ultimate theism without pantheism. The trouble is that this doctrine is not in all respects compatible with Christian theology. The Ptolemaic cosmos that depicted a *Primum Mobile* as the first sphere below the *coelum empireum* (also defined as *habitaculum Dei*) was well consistent with this thought. But Christian psychology insisted that the human soul is not the offspring of a universal intellect but, rather, every individual soul is immediately created by God.

Pico notes this contradiction by referring from the Saturn-Caelus debate back to an earlier chapter that discussed God as the creator of spiritual substance. There he blamed Ficino of having erroneously ascribed the true Christian doctrine to Plato.<sup>20</sup> As Pico sees it, Plotinus, Aristotle, and his Arab commentators maintained that God created "immediately" one, and only one, perfect intellectual being: the first Mind, from which, then, may stem other

<sup>17</sup> Pico, *Scritti*, 1942, p. 512: "... parole in quel luogo male intese e a qualche platonico e a tutti e' Manichei ..."; transl. Jayne, p. 116.

<sup>18</sup> Bacchelli, p. 118.

<sup>19</sup> Pico, *Scritti*, 1942, p. 512; transl. Jayne, p. 116.

<sup>20</sup> *Commento* I 4, *ibid.* p. 466: "Però mi maraviglio di Marsilio che tenga secondo Platone l'anima nostra essere immediatamente da Dio prodotta; il che non meno alla setta di Proclo che a quella di Porfirio repugna."

spirits.<sup>21</sup> The implication is, that according to the ancient schools God does not create, without intermediate creation, the human soul directly, which contradicts the Christian doctrine of the individual soul. With this assertion Pico opens the question of how far one can go in Christianizing Plato, as Ficino does. The strategy Pico follows seems to be: First, he claims to expose only the true interpretation of Platonic philosophy, which - of course - entitles him to criticize some who claim to be Platonists but lack consistency. Then, he shows that the most important tenets of Platonism, correctly interpreted, are incompatible with Christian theology - or, rather, that it takes an additional hermeneutic effort to interpret Platonism in a Christian way.

From this perspective, the first chapter of the *Commento* acquires meaning beyond the occasion for which it was written. Obviously inspired by Elia's instruction as quoted before, Pico opens his treatise by reminding that, in Platonic terms, "God is not Himself being but the cause of all being," so that it is tenable to say that God is not intellect but, rather "the source and cause of all intellect." This, he says with a wink, "can give a modern Platonist a good deal of trouble".<sup>22</sup> Ficino's trouble must have been that his entire strategy of Christianizing philosophy, and specifically of proving the immortality of the individual soul, depended on the philosophical theology of God as supreme intellect,<sup>23</sup> whereas Pico already here attacks this kind of Platonism by underscoring the metaphysical gap between the created human mind and God. In the long chapter 5 of *De ente et uno* he came back to this fundamental difference. On the second of four levels of approaching the 'darkness' of God, he states that "God is neither life, nor intellect, nor intelligible, but better and more excellent than that."<sup>24</sup> In order to make his statement plausible, Pico marshals Augustine and Dionysius the Areopagite.

His philosophical aim is to show that Platonism is not conducive to rationalize Christian faith; but if it is used this way, it endangers both a correct interpretation of Platonism and the foundations of faith. Pico's famous *Oration on the Dignity of Man* should be read as an appeal to spiritual conversion to which knowledge of all sorts of wisdom contributes if properly applied. It should also be read as part of Pico's larger project to keep paganism in check, of which the *Commento* and *De ente et uno* were parts. A Neoplatonic phi-

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. pp. 465 f.: "... dico che Iddio ab aeterno produse una creatura di natura incorporea ed intellettuale ... E però oltre lei niente altro produse ... secondo e' Platonici da Dio immediatamente non proviene altra creatura che questa prima mente ..."

<sup>22</sup> *Commento* I 1, ibid. p. 462: "... e' Platonici ... diranno che Dio, non est ens, ma è causa omnium entium. Similmente che Iddio non è intelletto, ma che lui è fonte e principio d'ogni intelletto; e' quali detti, per non essere inteso il fondamento loro, a' moderni Platonici danno gran noia." Transl. Jayne, p. 77.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Jayne, p. 180, note 10.

<sup>24</sup> *De ente et uno* 5, Pico, *Scritti*, 1942, p. 416: "Deum scilicet nec esse vitam nec intellectum neque intelligibile, sed melius aliquid atque praestantius omnibus his." For further references see note 66 in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Über das Seiende und das Eine*, ed. Paul Richard Blum, Gregor Damschen et al., Hamburg: Meiner, 2006, p. 87.



losophy in which human intellect is contiguous with the divine mind is frivolous in the eyes of Pico and his friends. Perhaps it was the Italian language that was perceived as dangerous, for Ficino's commentary on the *Symposium*, Benivieni's poetic condensation of it, and Pico's expansion of it circulated in the vernacular. More dangerous was probably the fact that ancient philosophy and mythology was interpreted there according to their internal logic. Petrarch's hope that the study of ancient mythology might enhance reverence for Christian truth was shared both by Ficino and Pico. Yet, Pico's sense of Christianity had changed towards some kind of piety.<sup>25</sup> Hence, although the *Commento* originally contained a sufficient number of hints against popularizing pagan Platonism, Girolamo Benivieni and Gianfrancesco Pico already deemed it politically incorrect to serve the market with philosophical trifles.

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<sup>25</sup> This did not spare Pico suspicion of heresy, but that is another facet of his work.