GIOVANNI PICO AND THE IDEAL OF CONCORDIA DISCORS: DISHARMONY AS A WAY TO ESOTERIC WISDOM

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Nec tam admirari quis debet, Patres, me in primis annis, in tenera etate... novam afferre velle philosophiam, quam vel laudare illam, si defenditur, vel damnare, si reprobatur¹

1. *Furor pichianus*

Between the summer and autumn of 1486 Giovanni Pico was enflamed by a kind of intellectual frenzy. Within a few months his pen produced the *Commentary* to Benivieni’s *Canzone*, the 900 *Conclusiones* and a first draft of the text that would later become the most famous *Oratio de hominis dignitate*. In July, 1486, the brilliant epistle on the poetry of Lorenzo il Magnifico was probably also written.² If we take into account the many important letters to his friends, which he wrote in between his studies, we gain the impression that the young Count was driven by the urgency to define his new impatient path to knowledge. During this time of feverish work the enthusiasm of a discovery is apparent, that is the perception of having found the way for overturning the very idea of wisdom.

In the works written during this year, the metaphors that express novelty and challenge are quite frequent. Truth has to be stirred—writes Pico already in the first draft of his *Oratio*—’like the movement that stirs and pokes the flame without extinguishing it’.³ Pico is looking for the stroke that can stir the flame of thought and seems to perceive the philosophy of his contemporaries as too repetitive. *Commentary*, *Conclusiones* and *Oratio* are addressed to different readers and are written in different styles. Nevertheless they reflect a common

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³ Garin, *La cultura filosofica*, 239: ‘velut motu quassatam flammam, excitat, non extinguit’.
methodological challenge. It is a complicated project, not immune from internal contradictions.

First of all, the texts written in 1486 share a metaphysical tension that is the desire to transcend physical reality, to reach the contemplation of the divine, and eventually to merge with it. In the Commentary to the Canzone the theme of elevation plays a very important role and gives a common perspective to the various attempts of poetic theology that the Count formulates on the basis of the poem of his friend Girolamo Benivieni. In the Commentary the path through which physical reality can be transcended is still depicted according to classical Neoplatonic vocabulary. Love is in fact the energy pushing toward the divine: an energy that at first addresses itself toward the ‘the external corporeal beauty’, then reaches the beauty of the soul, and finally elevates itself ‘to a more sublime level of contemplation so as to attain the primeval source of beauty, which is God’.

As far as the theory of love is concerned, Pico’s starting point is represented by the Commentary on Plato’s Symposium completed by Marsilio Ficino in 1469 and first published in 1484, by far the most influential work on the subject in the late Quattrocento. However, Pico repeatedly shows his disagreement with his older and distinguished mentor on several theoretical issues, going so far as to write that ‘our Marsilio…has committed all sorts of errors in every part of this treatise’.

In fact, also the itinerary of elevation that Pico follows is partly different from the one proposed by Ficino. To Neoplatonic love a deeper symbolical quest is added, according to which Pico harmonizes metaphors taken from classic mythology with other images coming from the Bible. In order to master the intellectual dilemma of the Conclusions, the Count tries to define the state of mind of a person who wants to start the ultramundane journey. It is easy to perceive an autobiographic flavour in the furore, the mystic frenzy of the subject that would like to escape the world and to approach God:

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4 As already stated by Garin, in Pico, De hominis dignitate, 11, Pico had probably almost completed his Commentary to Benivieni’s Canzone by mid-October 1486. However, the text was published posthumously in 1519.

5 Pico, Commento, in idem, De hominis dignitate, 538: ‘da la bellezza corporale esteriore…elevarsi a uno più sublime grado di contemplazione, tanto che si pervenga al primo fonte d’ogni bellezza che è Dio’.