

Giulio Busi and Raphael Ebgi. *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Mito, Magia, Qabbalah*. Milano: Einaudi, 2014. cvi + 454 pp. ISBN: 9788806198381. €80.

The latest work of Giulio Busi is a wondrous crossover between different literary genres and fields of research: in a bold attempt to blend together biography and the staggering variety of Pico's intellectual interests with a sound critical approach, this book is almost as complex and as multilayered as the Count's personality itself. And it probably couldn't be done otherwise; the book differs from other studies of Pico's philosophical work, developing a new approach. While drawing from the established critical sources (many of which are previous works by the same authors), Busi and Ebgi take an additional step and propose a different point of view on Pico's opus. Rather than piecing together the Count's often conflicting ideas and conclusions into an univocal interpretation, the authors explore Pico's works from a specific standpoint: *Myth, Magic, Kabbalah*. From the title it is clear that the main focus of the analysis is centered on mystical and esoteric elements (from Zoroastrian astrology to Neoplatonism, from Greek and Roman poetry to magic and *Kabbalah*), but the authors do not impose this point of view. It naturally emerges from the way that the argument is carried out.

Of course this kind of approach has its limits and is not indisputable. For example, the authors show a clear preference towards Pico's work of the year 1486 (*900 theses*, *Oration on dignity of man* and the *Apology*) and show little interest for later works such as *Heptaplus* and *On being and Unity*. But it's difficult to dispute this approach since 1486 is clearly the pivotal point in the Count's life and the *900 theses* stands out as one of the most original and challenging philosophical proposals of the Renaissance. True to his philological background, Busi aims to present as much material as possible while giving thorough information to support the proposed interpretation. But in order to do so he has to make sense of the chaotic variety of Pico's interests and provide a point of view that enables the reader to pierce the shroud of darkness surrounding his hermeneutics. In Busi's own words:

What to do with a guy like this? One option is to state that the confusion of topics is a result of the confusion of ideas, thus giving up the attempt to order Pico's universe. Or, and it's our choice, it's possible to go by trial and error and to jot on paper the few things that appear certain. The major symbolic tropes, the most

important images necessary to tread the rest of Pico's work and to unearth solitary landscapes, the insights hinted at but never explained by the Count. A method like this has some obvious limits. *Myth, magic, kabbalah* cannot glut the Count's omnivorous hunger; they are, nonetheless, the pivot of his system, and in the *scala sapientiae* that he lays out before our eyes in the *900 theses*, these three rungs are closely clutched together at the top of the ladder and lead directly to the hatch of the heavens. (xlvi, my translation)

Unlike Wirszubski's *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* – as well as other previous works by the authors – the aim of this work is not to depict the background and the fabric of this historic encounter between Jewish *Kabbalah* and Renaissance Neoplatonism but rather to expound on Pico's obscure doctrine in light of the priority he attributes to magic and *Kabbalah*. This book raises a question: what is the meaning of Pico's curiosity towards *Kabbalah*? Is it a juvenile infatuation or is it the key to unlock the Count's vision and fully understand the humanistic culture of the Renaissance? While it strongly hints towards the second option this book does not provide an unambiguous answer, and the reader must figure out his own approach to the problems, symbolical tropes and queries outlined by the authors.

The content and style are a challenge; on almost every page the reader is confronted by a different problem – or symbol, or reference to a different author – and the linguistic style, instead of making the reading more fluent, makes it more complicated: analogy, metaphor, play on words are all instruments used by the authors to bedazzle the reader – almost as if this highly allusive style is intended to mimic Pico's flamboyant manner. While this can be confusing – especially if the reader does not handle Italian well – I found this linguistic imitation helpful to get used to Pico's style and to comprehend his approach.

The book is divided in two main parts, the first written entirely by Busi and the second mostly by Ebgi. The first section is more conventional, serving as an introduction that provides the general context of the life and philosophy of the Count of Mirandola, as well as the hermeneutical coordinates that will be developed. Busi illustrates one of the cornerstones of his approach to Pico's thought and to the *900 theses* in particular: commenting on one of the Count's favorite parts of Plotinus's *Enneads* – where the philosopher describes the soul's ascent to God as a “passing of solitary to solitary” – Busi describes how Pico develops this idea in the *900 theses*, describing the passing of the individual soul and of the One in terms of the cabalistic concept of *tzimtzum*, the contraction of God. According to Busi, the knowledge of *Kabbalah* allows Pico to solve many of the contradictions that arise between Greek philosophy

and Christian faith: in this case the kabbalistic concept of *tzimtzum* enables Pico to describe the “passing of solitary to solitary” as an imitation of the transcendence of God, establishing an agreement between Plotinus and the holy scripture through the kabbalistic interpretation of the Torah. In Pico’s hands the “passing of solitary to solitary” is interpreted as an allusion to Exodus 25, 22: just as God manifests his presence by contracting his infinity into a single point between the Cherubs on the Ark of the Covenant, so in order to reach for God, the mystic needs to reproduce this movement – the *tzimtzum* – and concentrate on the “center of his unity.” Only by fleeing from the external world will he be able to meet God in his own solitude.

Moving on, the second part is rather peculiar because it is organized like a dictionary: each chapter discusses and elaborates a single symbolical trope. Here Ebgi analyzes each item with great detail and attention both to Pico’s edited texts and to the main sources of inspiration for his philosophy. This creates a set of very dynamic images, with each item synthetically describing the whole creative process of the Count’s short-lived philosophical career. For example, the entry “Kiss” perfectly shows the evolution of Pico’s thought: by arranging the material in a chronological order the author outlines the silhouette of the Count’s thought process through the most intense years of his life. The chapter begins referencing his early poetry, underlining the sensual side of this work as well as the debt to classical authors such as Moschus, Tibullus and Apuleius. As the chapter goes on, a more spiritual conception of *kiss* emerges, but rather than repeating established notions such as Plato’s, Pico uses these ideas to cleave through the ordinary conception of this symbol: Venus’s sensual kiss becomes the deathly kiss bestowed by God on Moses, a symbol of divine rapture and spiritual communion with God. However, instead of replacing the first image with the latter Pico employs this exegetical method to deepen the meaning of the *kiss* in an attempt to explain the ambiguous double nature of love: how can love be at the same time the strongest spiritual force and a source of sorrow for the one afflicted by it? Completely aware of the complexity of the phenomenon, Pico relinquishes the need to give a definition of love, and instead uses all kinds of tools to expound this idea; in his pages, *Kabbalah* and philosophy, Jews, Christians and Greeks, poets and prophets, everyone and everything cooperates to apprehend the mysteries and contradictions of reality.

All in all the 32 entries of this symbolical dictionary depict a very thorough picture of Pico’s thought, a picture where complexity is never dropped in favor of simplification and the hermeneutical guidelines are just developed

enough to make the book approachable without imposing a fixed point of view on the reader. The result is brilliant, even though the reading can be very demanding, and even frustrating if one is not used to being confronted with such a wild variety of ideas and authors. To any Italian reader interested in esoteric themes – or even just drawn by the Count's mysterious charm – this book is an essential read. It opens a new dimension for studies on Pico and digs deeply into his most arcane doctrines; let's hope that this work will someday find a translator.

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