

PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA

Walter Pater

Walter Pater (1839-1894) was an English literary critic, perhaps most famous for his book, The Renaissance (1871), the second chapter of which is reprinted below.

No account of the Renaissance can be complete without some notice of the attempt made by certain Italian scholars of the fifteenth century to reconcile Christianity with the religion of ancient Greece. To reconcile forms of sentiment which at first sight seem incompatible, to adjust the various products of the human mind to one another in one many-sided type of intellectual culture, to give humanity, for heart and imagination to feed upon, as much as it could possibly receive, belonged to the generous instincts of that age. An earlier and simpler generation had seen in the gods of Greece so many malignant spirits, the defeated but still living centers of the religion of darkness, struggling, not always in vain, against the kingdom of light. Little by little, as the natural charm of pagan story reasserted itself over minds emerging out of barbarism, the religious significance which had once belonged to it was lost sight of, and it came to be regarded as the subject of a purely artistic or poetical treatment. But it was inevitable that from time to time minds should arise, deeply enough impressed by its beauty and power to ask themselves whether the religion of Greece was indeed a rival of the religion of Christ; for the older gods had rehabilitated themselves, and men's allegiance was divided. And the fifteenth century was an impassioned age, so ardent and serious in its pursuit of art that it consecrated everything with which art had to do as a religious object. The restored Greek literature had made it familiar, at least in Plato, with a style of expression concerning the earlier gods, which had about it something of the warmth and unction of a Christian hymn. It was too familiar with such language to regard mythology as a mere story; and it was too serious to play with a religion.

“Let me briefly remind the reader” — says Heine, in the “Gods in Exile,” an essay full of that strange blending of sentiments which is characteristic of the traditions of the middle age concerning the pagan religions — “how the gods of the older world, at the time of the definite triumph of Christianity, that is, in the third century, fell into painful embarrassments, which greatly resembled certain tragical situations of their earlier life. They now found themselves

beset by the same troublesome necessities to which they had once before been exposed during the primitive ages, in that revolutionary epoch when the Titans broke out of the custody of Orcus, and, piling Pelion on Ossa, scaled Olympus. Unfortunate gods! They had then to take flight ignominiously, and hide themselves among us here on earth, under all sorts of disguises. The larger number betook themselves to Egypt, where for greater security they assumed the forms of animals, as is generally known. Just in the same way, they had to take flight again, and seek entertainment in remote hiding-places, when those iconoclastic zealots, the black brood of monks, broke down all the temples, and pursued the gods with fire and curses. Many of these unfortunate emigrants, now entirely deprived of shelter and ambrosia, must needs take to vulgar handicrafts, as a means of earning their bread. Under these circumstances, many whose sacred groves had been confiscated, let themselves out for hire as wood-cutters in Germany, and were forced to drink beer instead of nectar. Apollo seems to have been content to take service under graziers, and as he had once kept the cows of Admetus, so he lived now as a shepherd in Lower Austria. Here, however, having become suspected on account of his beautiful singing, he was recognized by a learned monk as one of the old pagan gods, and handed over to the spiritual tribunal. On the rack he confessed that he was the god Apollo; and before his execution he begged that he might be suffered to play once more upon the lyre, and to sing a song. And he played so touchingly, and sang with such magic, and was withal so beautiful in form and feature, that all the women wept, and many of them were so deeply impressed that they shortly afterwards fell sick. Some time afterwards the people wished to drag him from the grave again, that a stake might be driven through his body, in the belief that he had been a vampire, and that the sick women would by this means recover. But they found the grave empty.”

The Renaissance of the fifteenth century was, in many things, great rather by what it designed than by what it achieved. Much which it aspired to do, and did but imperfectly or mistakenly, was accomplished in what is called the *éclaircissement*¹ of the eighteenth century, or in our own

¹ French: ‘Enlightenment’.

generation; and what really belongs to the revival of the fifteenth century is but the leading instinct, the curiosity, the initiatory idea. It is so with this very question of the reconciliation of the religion of antiquity with the religion of Christ. A modern scholar occupied by this problem might observe that all religions may be regarded as natural products, that, at least in their origin, their growth, and decay, they have common laws, and are not to be isolated from the other movements of the human mind in which they respectively prevailed; that they arise spontaneously out of the human mind, as expressions of the varying phases of its sentiment concerning the unseen world; that every intellectual product must be judged from the point of view of the age and the people in which it was produced. He might go on to observe that each has contributed something to the development of the religious sense, and ranging them as so many stages in the gradual education of the human mind, justify the existence of each. The basis of the reconciliation of the religions of the world would be the inexhaustible activity and creativeness of the human mind itself, in which all religions alike have their root, and in which all alike are reconciled; just as the fancies of childhood and the thoughts of old age meet and are laid to rest, in the experience of the individual.

Far different was the method followed by the scholars of the fifteenth century. They lacked the very rudiments of the historic sense, which, by an imaginative act, throws itself back into a world unlike one's own, and estimates every intellectual creation in its connection with the age from which it proceeded. They had no idea of development, of the differences of the ages, of the process by which our race has been "educated." In their attempts to reconcile the religions of the world, they were thus thrown back upon the quicksand of allegorical interpretation. The religions of the world were to be reconciled, not as successive stages in a regular development of the religious sense, but as subsisting side by side, and substantially in agreement with one another. And here the first necessity was to misrepresent the language, the conceptions, the sentiments, it was proposed to compare and reconcile. Plato and Homer must be made to speak agreeably to Moses. Set side by side, the mere surfaces could never unite in any harmony of design. Therefore one must go below the surface, and bring up the supposed secondary, or still more remote meaning, — that diviner signification held in reserve, *in erecessu divinius aliquid*,² latent in some stray touch of Homer, or figure of speech in the book of Moses.

And yet as a curiosity of the human mind, a "madhouse-cell," if you will, into which we may peep for a moment, and see it at work weaving strange fancies, the allegorical interpretation of the fifteenth century has its interest. With its strange web of imagery, its quaint conceits, its unexpected combinations and subtle moralizing, it is an element in the local color of a great age. It illustrates also the faith of that age in all oracles, its desire to hear all voices, its generous belief that nothing which had ever interested the human mind could wholly lose its vitality. It is the counterpart, though certainly the feebler counterpart, of that practical truce and reconciliation of the gods of Greece with Christian religion, which is seen in the art of the time. And it is for his share in this work, and because his own story is a sort of analogue or visible equivalent to the expression of this purpose in his writings, that something of a general interest still belongs to the name of Pico della Mirandola, whose life, written by his nephew Francis, seemed worthy, for some touch of sweetness in it, to be translated out of the original Latin by Sir Thomas More, that great lover of Italian culture, among whose works the life of Pico, *Earl of Mirandola, and a great lord of Italy*, as he calls him, may still be read, in its quaint, antiquated English.

Marsilio Ficino has told us how Pico came to Florence. It was the very day — some day probably in the year 1482 — on which Ficino had finished his famous translation of Plato into Latin, the work to which he had been dedicated from childhood by Cosmo de' Medici, in furtherance of his desire to resuscitate the knowledge of Plato among his fellow-citizens. Florence indeed, as M. Renan has pointed out, had always had an affinity for the mystic and dreamy philosophy of Plato, while the colder and more practical philosophy of Aristotle had flourished in Padua, and other cities of the north; and the Florentines, though they knew perhaps very little about him, had had the name of the great idealist often on their lips. To increase this knowledge, Cosmo had founded the Platonic academy, with periodical discussions at the Villa Careggi. The fall of Constantinople in 1453, and the council in 1438 for the reconciliation of the Greek and Latin Churches, had brought to Florence many a needy Greek scholar. And now the work was completed, the door of the mystical temple lay open to all who could construe Latin, and the scholar rested from his labor; when there was introduced into his study, where a lamp burned continually before the bust of Plato, as other men burned lamps before their favorite saints, a young man fresh from a journey, "of feature and shape seemly and beauteous, of stature goodly and high, of flesh tender and soft, his visage

² Latin:

lovely and fair, his color white, intermingled with comely reds, his eyes grey, and quick of look, his teeth white and even, his hair yellow and abundant," and trimmed with more than the usual artifice of the time.

It is thus that Sir Thomas More translates the words of the biographer of Pico, who, even in outward form and appearance, seems an image of that inward harmony and completeness, of which he is so perfect an example. The word *mystic* has been usually derived from a Greek word which signifies *to shut*, as if one *shut one's lips* brooding over what cannot be uttered; but the Platonists themselves derive it rather from the act of *shutting the eyes*, that one may see the more, inwardly. Perhaps the eyes of the mystic Ficino, now long past the midway of life, had come to be thus half-closed; but when a young man, not unlike the archangel Raphael, as the Florentines of that age depicted him in his wonderful walk with Tobit, or Mercury, as he might have appeared in a painting by Sandro Botticelli or Piero di Cosimo, entered his chamber, he seems to have thought there was something not wholly earthly about him; at least, he ever afterwards believed that it was not without the coöperation of the stars that the stranger had arrived on that day. For it happened that they fell into a conversation, deeper and more intimate than men usually fall into on first sight. During this conversation Ficino formed the design of devoting his few remaining years to the translation of Plotinus, that new Plato, in whom the mystical element of the Platonic philosophy had been worked out to the utmost limit of vision and ecstasy and it is in dedicating this translation to Lorenzo de' Medici that Ficino has recorded these incidents.

It was after many wanderings, wanderings of the intellect as well as physical journeys, that Pico came to rest at Florence. Born in 1463, he was then about twenty years old. He was called Giovanni at baptism, Pico, like all his ancestors, from Picus, nephew of the Emperor Constantine, from whom they claimed to be descended, and Mirandola from the place of his birth, a little town afterwards part of the duchy of Modena, of which small territory his family had long been the feudal lords. Pico was the youngest of the family, and his mother, delighting in his wonderful memory, sent him at the age of fourteen to the famous school of law at Bologna. From the first, indeed, she seems to have had some presentiment of his future fame, for, with a faith in omens characteristic of her time, she believed that a strange circumstance had happened at the time of Pico's birth — the appearance of a circular flame which suddenly vanished away, on the wall of the chamber where she lay. He remained two years at Bologna; and then, with an inexhausti-

ble, unrivalled thirst for knowledge, passed through the principal schools of Italy and France, penetrating, as he thought, into the secrets of all ancient philosophies, and many Eastern languages. And with this flood of erudition came the generous hope, so often disabused, of reconciling the philosophers with one another, and all alike with the Church. At last he came to Rome. There, like some knight-errant of philosophy, he offered to defend nine hundred bold paradoxes, drawn from the most opposite sources, against all comers. But the pontifical court was led to suspect the orthodoxy of some of these propositions, and even the reading of the book which contained them was forbidden by the Pope. It was not until 1493 that Pico was finally absolved, by a brief of Alexander the Sixth. Ten years before that date he had arrived at Florence; an early instance of those who, after following the vain hope of an impossible reconciliation from system to system, have at last fallen back unsatisfied on the simplicities of their childhood's belief.

The oration which Pico composed for the opening of this philosophical tournament still remains; its subject is the dignity of human nature, the greatness of man. In common with nearly all medieval speculation, much of Pico's writing has this for its drift; and in common also with it, Pico's theory of that dignity is founded on a misconception of the place in nature both of the earth and of man. For Pico the earth is the center of the universe: and around it, as a fixed and motionless point, the sun and moon and stars revolve, like diligent servants or ministers. And in the midst of all is placed man, *nodus et vinculum mundi*, the bond or copula of the world, and the "interpreter of nature": that famous expression of Bacon's really belongs to Pico. "*Tritum est in scholis*," he says, "*esse hominem minorem mundum, in quo mixtum ex elementis corpus et spiritus coelestis et plantarum anima vegetalis et brutorum sensus et ratio et angelica mens et Dei similitudo conspicitur*" — "It is a commonplace of the schools that man is a little world, in which we may discern a body mingled of earthly elements, and ethereal breath, and the vegetable life of plants, and the senses of the lower animals, and reason, and the intelligence of angels, and a likeness to God."

A commonplace of the schools! But perhaps it had some new significance and authority, when men heard one like Pico reiterate it; and, false as its basis was, the theory had its use. For this high dignity of man, thus bringing the dust under his feet into sensible communion with the thoughts and affections of angels, was supposed to belong to him, not as renewed by a religious system, but by his own natural right. The proclamation of it was a counterpoise to the in-

creasing tendency of medieval religion to depreciate man's nature, to sacrifice this or that element in it, to make it ashamed of itself, to keep the degrading or painful accidents of it always in view. It helped man onward to that reassertion of himself, that rehabilitation of human nature, the body, the senses, the heart, the intelligence, which the Renaissance fulfils. And yet to read a page of one of Pico's forgotten books is like a glance into one of those ancient sepulchres, upon which the wanderer in classical lands has sometimes stumbled, with the old disused ornaments and furniture of a world wholly unlike ours still fresh in them. That whole conception of nature is so different from our own. For Pico the world is a limited place, bounded by actual crystal walls, and a material firmament; it is like a painted toy, like that map or system of the world, held, as a great target or shield, in the hands of the creative *Logos*, by whom the Father made all things, in one of the earlier frescoes of the *Campo Santo* at Pisa. How different from this childish dream is our own conception of nature, with its unlimited space, its innumerable suns, and the earth but a mote in the beam; how different the strange new awe, or superstition, with which it fills our minds! "The silence of those infinite spaces," says Pascal, contemplating a starlight night, "the silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me": — *Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie*.

He was already almost wearied out when he came to Florence. He had loved much and been beloved by women, "wandering over the crooked hills of delicious pleasure"; but their reign over him was over, and long before Savonarola's famous "bonfire of vanities," he had destroyed those love-songs in the vulgar tongue, which would have been so great a relief to us, after the scholastic prolixity of his Latin writings. It was in another spirit that he composed a Platonic commentary, the only work of his in Italian which was come down to us, on the "Song of Divine Love" — *secondo la mente ed opinione dei Platonici* — "according to the mind and opinion of the Platonists," by his friend Hieronymo Beniveni, in which, with an ambitious array of every sort of learning, and a profusion of imagery borrowed indifferently from the astrologers, the Cabala, and Homer, and Scripture, and Dionysius the Areopagite, he attempts to define the stages by which the soul passes from the earthly to the unseen beauty. A change, indeed, had passed over him, as if the chilling touch of the abstract and disembodied beauty Platonists profess to long for were already upon him. Some sense of this, perhaps, coupled with that over-brightness which in the popular imagination always betokens an early death, made Camilla Rucellai, one of those prophetic

women whom the preaching of Savonarola had raised up in Florence, declare, seeing him for the first time, that he would depart in the time of lilies — prematurely, that is, like the field-flowers which are withered by the scorching sun almost as soon as they are sprung up. He now wrote down those thoughts on the religious life which Sir Thomas More turned into English, and which another English translator thought worthy to be added to the books of the *Imitation*. "It is not hard to know God, provided one will not force one's self to define Him": — has been thought a great saying of Joubert's. "Love God," Pico writes to Angelo Politian, "we rather may, than either know Him, or by speech utter Him. And yet had man liefer knowledge never find that which they seek, than by love possess that thing, which also without love were in vain found."

Yet he who had this fine touch for spiritual things did not — and in this is the enduring interest of his story — even after his conversion, forget the old gods. He is one of the last who seriously and sincerely entertained the claim on men's faith of the pagan religions; he is anxious to ascertain the true significance of the obscurest legend, the lightest tradition concerning them. With many thoughts and many influences which led him in that direction, he did not become a monk; retaining "somewhat of the old plenty, in dainty viand and silver vessel," he gave over the greater part of his property to his friend, the mystical poet Beniveni, to be spent by him in works of charity, chiefly in the sweet charity of providing marriage-dowries for the peasant girls of Florence. His end came in 1494, when, amid the prayers and sacraments of Savonarola, he died of fever, on the very day on which Charles the Eighth entered Florence, the seventeenth of November, yet in the time of lilies — the lilies of the shield of France, as the people now said, remembering Camilla's prophecy. He was buried in the conventual church of Saint Mark, in the hood and white frock of the Dominican order.

It is because the life of Pico, thus lying down to rest in the Dominican habit, yet amid thoughts of the older gods, himself like one of those comely divinities, reconciled indeed to the new religion, but still with a tenderness for the earlier life, and desirous literally to "bind the ages each to each by natural piety" — it is because this life is so perfect a parallel to the attempt made in his writings to reconcile Christianity with the ideas of paganism, that Pico, in spite of the scholastic character of those writings, is really interesting. Thus, in the *Heptaplus, or Discourse on the Seven Days of the Creation*, he endeavors to reconcile the accounts which pagan philosophy had given of the origin of the world

with the account given in the books of Moses — the *Timæus* of Plato with the book of *Genesis*. The *Heptaplus* is dedicated to Lorenzo the Magnificent, whose interest, the preface tells us, in the secret wisdom of Moses is well known. If Moses seems in his writings simple and even popular, rather than either a philosopher or a theologian, that is because it was an institution with the ancient philosophers, either not to speak of divine things at all, or to speak of them dissemblingly: hence their doctrines were called mysteries. Taught by them, Pythagoras became so great a "master of silence," and wrote almost nothing, thus hiding the words of God in his heart, and speaking wisdom only among the perfect. In explaining the harmony between Plato and Moses, Pico lays hold on every sort of figure and analogy, on the double meanings of words, the symbols of the Jewish ritual, the secondary meanings of obscure stories in the later Greek mythologists. Everywhere there is an unbroken system of correspondences. Every object in the terrestrial world is an analogue, a symbol or counter-part, of some higher reality in the starry heavens, and this again of some law of the angelic life in the world beyond the stars. There is the element of fire in the material world; the sun is the fire of heaven; and in the super-celestial world there is the fire of the seraphic intelligence. "But behold how they differ! The elementary fire burns, the heavenly fire vivifies, the super-celestial fire loves." In this way, every natural object, every combination of natural forces, every accident in the lives of men, is filled with higher meanings. Omens, prophecies, supernatural coincidences, accompany Pico himself all through life. There are oracles in every tree and mountain-top, and a significance in every accidental combination of the events of life.

This constant tendency to symbolism and imagery gives Pico's work a figured style, by which it has some real resemblance to Plato's, and he differs from other mystical writers of his time by a genuine desire to know his authorities at first hand. He reads Plato in Greek, Moses in Hebrew, and by this his work really belongs to the higher culture. Above all, we have a constant sense in reading him, that his thoughts, however little their positive value may be, are connected with the strings beneath them of deep and passionate emotion; and when he explains the grades or steps by which the soul passes from the love of a physical object to the love of unseen beauty, and unfolds the analogies between this process and other movements upward of human thought, there is a glow and vehemence in his words which remind one of the manner in which his own brief existence flamed itself away.

I said that the Renaissance of the fifteenth century was, in many things, greater rather by what it designed or aspired to do, than by what it actually achieved. It remained for a later age to conceive the true method of effecting a scientific reconciliation of Christian sentiment with the imagery, the legends, the theories about the world, of pagan poetry and philosophy. For that age the only possible reconciliation was an imaginative one, and resulted from the efforts of artists, trained in Christian schools, to handle pagan subjects; and of this artistic reconciliation work like Pico's was but the feebler counterpart. Whatever philosophers had to say on one side or the other, whether they were successful or not in their attempts to reconcile the old to the new, and to justify the expenditure of so much care and thought on the dreams of a dead faith, the imagery of the Greek religion, the direct charm of its story, were by artists valued and cultivated for their own sake. Hence a new sort of mythology, with a tone and qualities of its own. When the shipload of sacred earth from the soil of Jerusalem was mingled with the common clay in the *Campo Santo* at Pisa, a new flower grew up from it, unlike any flower men had seen before, the anemone with its concentric rings of strangely blended color, still to be found by those who search long enough for it, in the long grass of the Maremma. Just such a strange flower was that mythology of the Italian Renaissance, which grew up from the mixture of two traditions, two sentiments, the sacred and the profane. Classical story was regarded as so much imaginative material to be received and assimilated. It did not come into men's minds to ask curiously of science, concerning the origin of such story, its primary form and import, its meaning for those who projected it. The thing sank into their minds, to issue forth again with all the tangle about it of medieval sentiment and ideas. In the *Doni Madonna* in the *Tribute* of the *Uffizii*, Michelangelo actually brings the pagan religion, and with it the unveiled human form, the sleepy-looking fauns of a Dionysiac revel, into the presence of the Madonna, as simpler painters had introduced there other products of the earth, birds or flowers, while he has given that Madonna herself much of the uncouth energy of the older and more primitive "Mighty Mother."

This picturesque union of contrasts, belonging properly to the art of the close of the fifteenth century, pervades, in Pico della Mirandola, an actual person and that is why the figure of Pico is so attractive. He will not let one go; he wins one on, in spite of one's self, to turn again to the pages of his forgotten books, although we know already that the actual solution proposed in them will satisfy us as little as

perhaps it satisfied him. It is said that in his eagerness for mysterious learning he once paid a great sum for a collection of cabalistic manuscripts, which turned out to be forgeries; and the story might well stand as a parable of all he ever seemed to gain in the way of actual knowledge. He had sought knowledge, and passed from system to system, and hazarded much; but less for the sake of positive knowledge than because he believed there was a spirit of order and beauty in knowledge, which would come down and unite what men's ignorance had divided, and renew what time had made dim. And so, while his actual work has passed away, yet his own qualities are still active, and himself remains, as one alive in the grave, *caesiis et vigilibus oculis*, as his biographer describes him, and with that sanguine, clear skin, *decenti rubore interspersa*, as with the light of morning upon it; and he has a true place in that group of great Italians who fill the end of the fifteenth century with their names, he is a true humanist. For the essence of humanism is that belief of which he seems never to have doubted, that nothing which has ever interested living men and women can wholly lose its vitality — no language they have spoken, nor oracle beside which they have hushed their voices, no dream which has once been entertained by actual human minds, nothing about which they have ever been passionate, or expended time and zeal.