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Giovanni Pico della Mirandola
JOHN WARWICK MONTGOMERY

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Eros and Agape in the Thought of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola¹

By JOHN WARWICK MONTGOMERY

INTRODUCTION

Anders Nygren's remarkable work, *Agape and Eros*,² whose German edition appeared in Carl Stange's monographic series, "Studies of the Apologetics Seminar,"³ and which opposes the interpretations both of Harnack⁴ and of Scholz,⁵

received from the outset high commendation as a classic theological production. In his review of the English translation of Part Two of *Agape and Eros* Sydney Cave wrote: "Dr. Nygren's fresh and suggestive study puts many an old problem in a new light and in particular shows how false were some of Harnack's brilliant generalizations on the history of early Christian thought and piety. . . . It is some years since we have read so suggestive and significant a book on the history of doctrine; or one that makes so clear the difference between Protestant and Roman Catholic theology and ethics."⁶

¹ At the outset of this study I wish to express appreciation to Dr. Gunnar Hillerdal of the University of Lund, Sweden, under whose supervision it was carried out.

² Published originally in Swedish at Stockholm (Part One, 1930; Part Two, 1936). German translation: *Eros und Agape. Gestaltwandlungen der christlichen Liebe* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1930 [1. Teil], 1937 [2. Teil]). Part One was translated into English in abridged form by A. G. Hebert in 1932 and published by the SPCK in London. Philip S. Watson translated Part Two, which was issued in two separate volumes by SPCK in 1938—39. In 1953 Watson revised and completed Hebert's translation of Part One, and the work was finally published in a single English volume (London: SPCK; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953). In this article all page references will apply to this latter edition of the English translation.

³ The book was dedicated to Stange, who celebrated his 60th birthday on March 7, 1930. G. A. van den Bergh van Eysinga notes this and uses the apologetics connection as a point of departure for his excellent review of Part One of the work. See the "Boekbeoordeelingen" section of *Nieuw theologisch Tijdschrift* (Haarlem), XX (1931), 253—256.

⁴ See the review of Part Two by Kurt Kessler in *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, LXIV: 6 (1939), 220—222.

⁵ Heinrich Scholz's *Eros und Caritas: Die platonische Liebe und die Liebe im Sinne des*

Although the main interpretative theme of the work has received criticism from some quarters,⁷ Nygren could write in 1953, over 20 years after the publication of Part One of the original book: "In the discussion of the subject that has so far taken place, I have found no reason to

Christentums was published at Halle by Max Niemeyer in 1929. Cf. the composite review by W. Blossfeldt of Nygren's book, Scholz's work, and of L. Grünhut's *Eros und Agape* (Leipzig: L. Hirschfeld, 1931), in *Blätter für deutsche Philosophie*, VI (1932/33), 413—417.

⁶ *Congregational Quarterly*, XVII (1939), 101, 360.

⁷ Note especially J. Burnaby, *Amor Dei* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938); and M. C. D'Arcy, *The Mind and Heart of Love* (New York: Holt, 1947). Also see the review by Philip S. Watson in *Expository Times*, XLIX, 12 (1938), 537—540.

abandon my original position at any point"⁸—and the vast majority of Protestant theologians seem to have agreed with this stand.

The author of *Agape and Eros* would be the first, however, to admit the limitations of the volume. The purpose of the work is very specific: to identify and investigate, by the sophisticated methodological technique of *Motivforskning* ("motif research"), the classical and Christian ideas of love as these have interacted in the patristic, medieval, and Reformation church. No attempt is made to provide an all-embracing historical study of the motifs; the historical data included serve chiefly as illustrations of the principal encounters between Eros and Agape. The survey character of Part Two of the work thus entails both an advantage and a disadvantage—the advantage of clarity and the disadvantage of overprecise categorization. A particular illustration of this latter difficulty will hold our attention in the present paper.

Nygren's section on "The Renewal of the Eros Motif in the Renaissance" occupies three brief chapters in his total work. At the outset of the section he writes: "During the whole of the Middle Ages, Eros had been a living reality—but it was imprisoned in the Caritas-synthesis. . . . Toward the end of the Middle Ages, however, the situation is entirely altered. . . . The tension between the two motifs . . . has become so strong that the synthesis must disintegrate. The result of the disintegration may be expressed thus: the Renaissance takes up the Eros motif, the

Reformation the Agape motif. The most clear and interesting example of the concern of the Renaissance for Eros is provided by Marsilio Ficino." (pp. 667, 669)

The succeeding discussion in Nygren's three Renaissance chapters consists entirely of an analysis of Ficino's teachings on love, and quite effectively demonstrates that Ficino presented a consistent, thoroughgoing Eros point of view. However, one is compelled to ask the question: Can we generalize from Ficino to the Renaissance as a whole? Granting that Ficino was "the life" of the Platonic Academy at Florence (to use Nygren's own expression), are we to assume from this that all important Renaissance figures maintained a static Eros conception of love? The mere fact that Nygren does not distinguish a "low" from a "high" Renaissance, or a "southern" from a "northern," gives us real cause for suspicion—particularly since the northern Renaissance seems to have had much more in common with the Reformation than with what Burckhardt termed "the civilization of the Renaissance in Italy."⁹ But leaving these interesting considerations aside, we shall deal with a single figure of the High Italian Renaissance, a close friend of Ficino himself, and attempt to point out, through examining his conception of love, the dangers of assuming either that an historical epoch can be characterized by a single motif or synthesis or that a given philosopher-theologian must be associated with a single motif or harmonization of motifs.

We begin with a brief overview of the life of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, des-

⁸ *Agape and Eros*, p. vi. Hereafter page references to this work will be given in parentheses in the text.

⁹ Cf. Albert Hyma, *The Christian Renaissance* (New York: Century Company, 1925).

ignated the "Phoenix of the wits,"¹⁰ by Ficino and increasingly known in our own day through his "Oration on the Dignity of Man."¹¹ Having provided the reader with biographical orientation, we shall discuss the concept of love in the thought of this remarkable Renaissance figure.

THE LIFE OF PICO OF MIRANDOLA

Our purpose in giving this sketch of Pico's brief life is not to reveal new facts about him (although the account will be based on original sources to a greater extent than is the case with most modern treatments).¹² It is rather our intention here to immerse the reader in the spirit of the times in which Pico lived and thus to provide an adequate background for understanding Pico's ethical point of view

¹⁰ Other contemporary testimonies to Pico are given in Pearl Kibre, *The Library of Pico della Mirandola* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), pp. 3, 4.

¹¹ Conveniently available in English translation in Petrarca et al., *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 223—254. Kristeller asserts that in Pico "we have the picture of a many-sided if not 'universal' intellectual activity that corresponded to the best traditions and ideals of his time." *Ibid.*, p. 216.

¹² One of the chief sources upon which my biographical sketch of Pico is based is the little-known but scholarly thorough *Memoirs of Politianus, Picus, et al.*, by W. Parr Greswell, 2d ed. (London: Cadell and Davies, 1805), which contains a book-length (200-page) account of Pico's life and works (pp. 153—367), based chiefly on Pico's letters and on some difficult-to-obtain original source materials. Greswell quotes these in the original languages (Latin, Greek, Italian) and occasionally gives translations as well. Pico's complete correspondence, it should be noted, is best consulted in the Basel (1572) edition of his works, *Opera omnia Ioannis Pici*, I, 340—410.

in general and his concept of love in particular.

J. M. Rigg's evaluation of Pico's personality makes an appropriate beginning for this account of his life.

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, "the Phoenix of the wits," is one of those writers whose personality will always count for a great deal more than their works. His extreme, almost feminine beauty, high rank, and chivalrous character, his immense energy and versatility, his insatiable thirst for knowledge, his passion for theorizing, his rare combination of intellectual hardihood with genuine devoutness of spirit, his extraordinary precocity, and his premature death make up a personality so engaging that his name at any rate, and the record of his brief life, must always excite the interest and enlist the sympathy of mankind, though none but those few in any generation who love to loiter curiously in the bypaths of literature and philosophy will ever care to follow his eager spirit through the labyrinths of recondite speculation which it once thrived with such high and generous hope.¹³

Giovanni Pico was born on Feb. 24, 1463, at Mirandola, a small territory not far from Ferrara, afterward absorbed into the duchy of Modena. Mirandola had become independent in the 14th century and had received the fief of Concordia from the emperor Sigismund in 1414.¹⁴ Appropriately, Pico's birth was attended by an amazing prodigy. The story is well related

¹³ *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, J. M. Rigg, ed. (London: David Nutt, 1890), p. v. Rigg here republishes Sir Thomas More's paraphrase translation of the primary source account of Pico's life by G. F. Pico.

¹⁴ Paul Lejay, "Mirandola, Giovanni Pico della," *Catholic Encyclopedia*, X, 352.

by Ehrman, who retells it from G. F. Pico and More:

Suddenly the stillness of the early morning was rudely shattered. The Prince and the priest, hurriedly crossing themselves, ran to a casement. A dazzling light in the shape of a fiery garland hovered about the chamber above. Brighter and brighter it grew. It seemed almost as if in an effort to cast its portent far and wide, that this circlet of fire sought to blind its beholders. Then with no less remarkable speed than it had come, it disappeared in the heavens. Slowly the overseer of men and the guardian of souls turned. In the light of the burning flambeau their faces, drained of all color, looked seared and grey. As they faced each other in questioning silence, the sound of women's voices raised in exclamations of joy was carried from the upper rooms of the castle. Of a sudden the noise ceased. The wail of a newborn babe floated through the quiet air. Both men fell to their knees and prayed. To the lord of Mirandola and Concordia another son had been born.¹⁵

In all probability Pico was very young when his father died, and the matter of his education devolved upon his mother. He was a remarkable child, and his powers of memory were particularly great. In More's *Life of Pico* we read:

Under ye rule and governaunce of his mother he was set to maysters & to lernynge: where with so ardent mynde he labored the studyes of humanite: yt within shorte whyle he was (and not without a cause) accompted amonge the chyef Oratours and Poetes of that tyme: in learynge mervaylously swyfte and of so redy a wyt, that ye versis whiche he herde ones red he wolde agayne bothe forwarde

and backwarde to the grete wonder of the herers reherse, and over that wolde holde hit in sure remembraunce: whiche in other folkes wonte comenly to happen contrary. For they yt are swyfte in takyng be oftentymes slowe in remembrynge, and they yt with more labour & dyffyculte receyve hit more fast & surely holde hit.¹⁶

Pico's mother desired that he have a church career and sent him to Bologna at the age of 14 to acquire a knowledge of the pontifical letters (decretals). He disliked the dry, routine nature of the work and remained at Bologna for only two years. After this he spent seven years studying at Ferrara, Padua, Florence, and Perugia. During this time he started corresponding with Politian, formed a strong friendship with Ficino, and made the acquaintance of Savonarola. Of the latter contact Villari writes:

Meanwhile our hero, Savonarola, sat among the other monks, absorbed in his own thoughts, his cowl drawn over his head. His pale and haggard face, the fixed yet sparking glance of his deep-set eyes, the heavy lines seaming his forehead—his whole appearance, in short, indicated a profoundly thoughtful mind. Anyone comparing him with Pico, the one full of charm, courteous, sociable, and buoyant; the other full of gravity, lonely, severe, and almost harsh, might have judged the two characters to be thoroughly antagonistic and incapable of coming to an understanding. Yet from that day each felt drawn to the other, and their sympathy went on increasing.¹⁷

That Pico was involved in amours at this

¹⁶ Rigg, p. 8.

¹⁷ Pasquale Villari, *Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola*, trans. Linda Villari (New York: Scribner and Welford, 1888), I, 77. This is the definitive biography of Savonarola.

¹⁵ Sidney Hellman Ehrman, *Three Renaissance Silhouettes* (New York: Putnam, 1928), pp. 84, 85.

period seems evident from his correspondence.¹⁸ He gave vent to his emotions in verses which he later destroyed.

In 1486 Pico wrote a commentary on Girolamo Benivieni's *canzone* on "Celestial Love." Since this work most fully sets forth Pico's early conception of the love idea, we shall examine it in detail in the next section of this paper. That same year Pico went to Rome and published his famous 900 "Conclusiones," or Theses, touching on all fields of knowledge—and intended to defend them against anyone who would dispute with him. He was willing even to pay the traveling expenses of scholars who did not live in Rome but who nevertheless desired to take part in the debate. His famous *De hominis dignitate* was written at this time. Concerning it Kristeller says:

Pico's *Oration* was written as an introductory speech for this projected disputation, probably in 1486. Apparently it was not usual to furnish this kind of rhetorical introduction for a disputation. Yet introductory speeches at the beginning of the school year or at the opening of particular courses were an established custom of medieval schools and universities—a custom further developed by the Humanists of the Renaissance. Pico's disputation speech was obviously patterned after such examples of academic eloquence.¹⁹

This disputation never took place, how-

ever, because the ecclesiastical authorities accused Pico of heresy in 13 of his theses. He was ultimately cleared only through a special appeal to the Pope (Innocent VIII). The volume in which his theses were contained was suppressed.

Giovanni Francesco gives the impression that Pico's printing of the theses was motivated by a desire for glory and that his devotion to the religious was not very great at the time. The section concerned with the theses is titled in More's translation: "Of His Mynde and Vaynglorious Dispitions of Rome," and in it More says, "Yet was he not kendlid in ye love of God."²⁰ The impression that Pico was in a low spiritual state at the time is increased by the title of the next section of this work, which reads: "Of the Change of His Lyfe."²¹ In order not to receive a wrong impression here, one must note that although Pico was undoubtedly motivated by a youthful desire for fame in publishing his theses, he was beyond reproach in respect to Roman orthodoxy. Concerning Pico's theses even Paul Lejay (in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*) states unequivocally, "Innocent VIII was made to believe that at least thirteen of these theses were heretical, though in reality they merely revealed the shallowness of the learning of that epoch."²² Greswell offers decisive proof on this point:

This undertaking of Pico's, however extraordinary it may at present appear, was in some measure sanctioned by the custom of his own age, in which public disputations were not unusual or unprecedented. He had fortified himself with the express

¹⁸ See Greswell, pp. 166—176, and Rigg.

¹⁹ *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, p. 217. In a paper on "Renaissance Humanism," read before the 75th annual meeting of the American Historical Association on Dec. 28, 1960, Hanna H. Gray maintained that eloquence—the rhetorical emphasis—is one of the chief unifying characteristics of Renaissance Humanism.

²⁰ Rigg, p. 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²² Lejay, *loc. cit.*

permission of Innocent VIII, who at this time occupied the chair of St. Peter. He studiously and avowedly professed all possible deference to the authority of the church, solemnly engaging to support his theses only "sub apostolicae sedis correctione." Nay more, when in his list of "Conclusiones," after a great number to be maintained "secundum opinionem aliorum," he introduces no fewer than five hundred "secundum opinionem propriam." Of these he says, "nihil assertive, vel probabiliter pono, nisi quatenus id vel verum vel probabile iudicat sacrosancta Romana ecclesia et caput eius bene meritum, Pontifex Innocentius Octavus; cuius iudicio qui mentis suae iudicium non submittit, mentem non habet."²³

It was chiefly the jealousy of the Roman divines which resulted in Pico's condemnation, as he himself says in his hastily composed *Apologia* (1489), which he dedicated to Lorenzo de Medici.²⁴

After his acquittal Pico journeyed to France, where he was presented to Charles VIII.²⁵ Soon after, he was ordered by the pope to return to Rome on account of renewed antagonism towards him, which had been incited primarily by his *Apologia*. The pope permitted him to take up residence in the vicinity of Florence, but it was not until 1493 that he received complete exoneration (from Pope Alexander VI).

About 1489 was published Pico's *Hep-taplus*, "a rather rhapsodic treatment of the Biblical account of creation."²⁶ In

²³ Greswell, pp. 230, 231.

²⁴ Pico, *Apologia*, in *Opera*, I, 114—125.

²⁵ Rigg, p. 86.

²⁶ Joseph Leon Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), p. 28.

March 1491 Pico completed his treatise *De Ente et Uno*, the theme of which he sets forth in his introductory address to Politian.

Though you know me to have it in view (in a more extensive work, upon which I am at present employed) to shew the agreement of Plato and Aristotle; you earnestly solicit me briefly to commit to writing the principal arguments which I adduced to you in person, upon the before-mentioned occasion, and when, if I am not mistaken, our friend Domenicus Benivenius was also present, who is endeared to us both, as well by his erudition as integrity. To Politian, whom I may term my almost inseparable associate, I can refuse nothing, especially of a literary nature.²⁷

Pico remained in Florence until the summer of 1491, at which time he accompanied Politian to Venice. They returned to Florence in time to be present at the deathbed of Lorenzo (April 8, 1492). Then Pico went to Ferrara. From his correspondence we learn that here he almost blinded himself working with the Hebrew books of a Sicilian Jew who intended to leave the city in 20 days.²⁸

Some years before his death Pico underwent a striking change in life. He burned the love poetry written in his youth and concentrated his whole attention on theological studies. From this final period of his life come the short devotional works which embody his mature conception of love and which we shall discuss below: "An Interpretation of Psalm Sixteen," "An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer," "Twelve Rules of Spiritual Battle," and "Twelve

²⁷ Greswell, p. 304 (Greswell's translation).

²⁸ *Opera* I, 360. See also Blau, pp. 29, 30.

Properties of a Lover." For a very inadequate remuneration he transferred to his nephew, Giovanni Francesco, his share of the ancestral principalities of Mirandola and Concordia. He used the money for the support of his household and for charitable donations. He refused the highest ecclesiastical honors. More writes:

When he sawe many men with grete labour & money desyre & bysely purchase ye offices & dygnities of ye chirche (whiche are now a dayes alas ye whyle communely bought & solde) him selfe refused to recyve them whan two kynges offred them; whan an other man offred hym grete worldly promocyon yf he wolde go to ye kynges courte: he gave hym suche an answer, that he sholde well knowe that he neyther desyred worship ne worldly ryches but rather set them at nought yt he might ye more quyetyly gyve hym selfe to study & ye servyce of God: this wyse he persuaded yt to a phyllosophre and hym yt seketh for wysedome it was not prayse to gather rychesse but to refuse them.²⁹

He determined to devote his old age to the defense of the faith; his intention was to produce a work *Adversus hostes ecclesiae*, in which he would refute

I. The avowed and open enemies of Christianity; II. Atheists and those who reject every religious system, upon their own mode of reasoning; III. The Jews, from

²⁹ Rigg, p. 19. Ivan Pusino, in his article, "Zur Quellenkritik für eine Biographie Picos," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, XLV (1927), 370—382, argues on the basis of some of Pico's surviving vernacular sonnets that his conversion was gradual, evolutionary, and "natural," not sudden, traumatic, and externally motivated; and that in stressing a sudden change of life G. F. Pico's biography was too much colored by its author's acceptance of Savonarola's religious approach. However this may be, the fact of a conversion cannot be doubted, as Pusino himself is quick to point out.

the books of the Old Testament and their own writers; IV. The followers of Mahomet from the Koran; V. Idolators and such as are addicted to any superstitious science, amongst whom, he particularly directed the artillery of his arguments against the partizans of judicial astrology; VI. Those who, perverting the doctrine of Christianity, or denying due obedience to the church, i. e., heretics, whom he distinguished into no fewer than two hundred species, intending to make them so many distinct subjects of his animadversion; VII. Those Christians who "hold the truth in unrighteousness" and discredit and contradict their profession by their practice.³⁰

Only the section against astrologers was published (1495) — the notes which Pico had written for other works were in various types of shorthand that could not be deciphered after his death. On the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem* Paul Lejay says, "Because of this book and his controversy against astrology Pico marks an era and a decisive progressive movement in ideas."³¹ Pico had even intended to take the crucifix in hand and travel barefooted from city to city as a preacher of the Gospel.

Pico died of a fever on Nov. 17, 1494, not yet 32 years of age. His intimate friend Politian had passed away only two months before. Pico died on the day Charles VIII of France made his triumphant entrance into Florence. On hearing of Pico's illness Charles sent with all possible speed two of his own personal physicians and with his own hand wrote the scholar a letter expressing his sympathy. Pico's remains were interred in the church

³⁰ Greswell, p. 331 (Greswell's translation).

³¹ Lejay, loc. cit.

of San Marco, near those of Politian. His epitaph reads:³²

Ioannes Iacet Hic Mirandula. Caetera
Norunt et Tagus et Ganges Forsan et
Antipodes.

His death was mourned by the learned in all parts of Europe. Before his burial, although he had never taken orders, he was invested with the habit of the Fratri Predicanti (Dominicans) by the hands of their general, Savonarola, who had been Pico's confessor and who had almost persuaded him to become a member of his order.

THE CONCEPT OF LOVE IN PICO'S THOUGHT

Orientalion

Little has been written on Pico's ethics in general or on his view of love in particular. Arthur Levy's doctoral dissertation at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, Berlin, in 1908, attempted to deal with the whole gamut of Pico's philosophical thought, and approximately one fourth of the work was devoted to his anthropology and ethics. But, unhappily, less than half of the total work was ever published, and the ethics section is known to us only by its table of contents.³³ From this table of contents it is evident, however, that Levy believed there is but a single unified con-

cept of love in Pico — a concept involving the three aspects of *sinnliche Liebe*, *rationale Liebe*, and *intellektuelle Gottesliebe*, the latter making possible *die Erreichung der Glückseligkeit*.

Perhaps the importance of the love concept in Pico has been stressed most by Eugenio Garin, who makes it the subject of the final chapter of his standard work, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Vita e dottrina*.³⁴ It is Garin's belief that the love idea acts as the harmonizing principle for the amazing religio-philosophical syncretism characteristic of Pico's thought.³⁵ In setting forth Pico's love concept, Garin cites the later devotional works (*Spiritualis pugnae arma; In orat. dom. expositio; In Psalmum XV {i. e., XVI} comm.*) in immediate conjunction with his early *Commento alla canzone d'amore*. Clearly Garin sees but a single love idea in Pico. He can say, in fact: "Pico is able to draw the work of his precocious maturity to a close by returning to the impetuous enthusiasm of his youth."³⁶

The question before us is whether Pico really held a single, static conception of love or whether his thought on the subject underwent a change in the course of his religious development. From an a priori standpoint, it could be argued, on the one hand, that Pico's short scholarly life militates against the probability of such a change; on the other hand, one can emphasize the biographical fact that Pico experienced a religious "conversion" several years prior to his early death. Pierre-

³² Greswell, p. 355.

³³ Arthur Levy, *Die Philosophie Giovanni Picos della Mirandola: Ein Beitrag zur Philosophie der Frührenaissance (Einleitung, Kapitel I, Kapitel II, Abschnitt C)* (Berlin: Ebering, 1908), 49 p. The table of contents to the entire dissertation is given on pp. 3—6; Ch. 4 dealt with Pico's anthropology and ethics. An examination of the *Jahresverzeichnis der deutschen Hochschulschriften* indicates that the dissertation was published only in this incomplete form.

³⁴ Pubblicazioni della R. Università degli Studi di Firenze. Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia. Ser. III, Vol. 5 (Firenze: Felice Le Monnier, 1937).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

Marie Cordier, though wishing to tone down the severity of this religious crisis, readily admits that Savonarola "exercised an undeniable influence on Pico from 1490 to his death" and that the short devotional works which Pico wrote in the last two years of his life "show the intense rhythm of his religious life in these final years."³⁷ Rigg asserts that "as his short life drew towards its close Pico's preoccupation with religion became more intense and exclusive."³⁸ However, such a question as we have posed cannot be answered a priori. It is obviously essential that we examine Pico's earlier and later writings themselves.

The Young Pico

It would undoubtedly be possible to induce the conception of love maintained by the young Pico if we were to analyze the anthropocentric anthropology in such writings as his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*; however, a much more direct approach is possible through his *Commento alla canzone d'amore*, which specifically sets forth his views on the subject. We shall therefore restrict ourselves in this section to a discussion of the *Commento*.

The occasion for the writing of the *Commento* was the production of Girolamo Benivieni's *Canzone d'amore secondo la mente e opinione de' Platonici*.

Benivieni . . . was a Platonist, and having saturated himself with the Symposium and the Phaedrus, the fifth book of the third Ennead of Plotinus, and Ficino's commentaries, thought himself qualified to write a canzone on ideal love which should put Guinicelli and Cavalcanti to

shame. The result was that he produced a canzone which has a certain undeniable elevation of style, but is so obscure that even with the help of Pico's detailed commentary it takes some hard study to elicit its meaning. The theme, however, is the purifying influence of love in raising the soul through various stages of refinement from the preoccupation with sensuous beauty to the contemplation of the ideal type of the beautiful, and thence to the knowledge of God, who, though, as Pico is careful to explain, He is not beautiful Himself, since beauty implies an element of variety repugnant to His nature, is nevertheless the source of the beautiful no less than of the true and the good.³⁹

Pico's *Commento* on the poem is his "only important work in the vernacular,"⁴⁰ and breathes a thoroughgoing Platonic atmosphere. Even Cordier, who avowedly wishes to show that Pico is "the purest figure of Christian humanism," says of the content of the *Commento*: "Such a teaching is far removed from Catholic thought."⁴¹ The *Commento* was not published until after Pico's death; and Giovanni Francesco Pico insisted that it appear in Latin rather than in Tuscan, in order not to "cast pearls

³⁹ Ibid., pp. xxiv—xxv. A detailed analysis of Pico's *Commento* is given in John Charles Nelson, *Renaissance Theory of Love* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 54—63.

⁴⁰ Edmund G. Gardner, ed. *A Platonic Discourse upon Love by Pico della Mirandola* (Boston: Merrymount Press, 1914), p. xx. Gardner has here republished a 1651 abridged English translation of Pico's *Commento* by Thomas Stanley. The original of the *Commento*, together with Benivieni's poem, is best consulted in the critical edition of Pico's works by Eugenio Garin: Pico, *De hominis dignitate et al.*, Edizioni Nazionale dei Classici del Pensiero Italiano (Firenze: Vallecchi Editore, 1942), pp. 443—581.

⁴¹ Cordier, p. 63.

³⁷ Pierre-Marie Cordier, *Jean Pic de la Mirandole* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Debrasse, 1957), pp. 45, 47.

³⁸ Rigg, p. xxxvii.

before swine." Benivieni himself wrote of it after Pico's death:⁴²

When Pico and I reread that *Canzone* and the commentary on it, the spirit and fervor which had led me to compose it and him to interpret it had already given out, and there was born in our minds some shadow of doubt whether it was proper for one who professes the law of Christ and wishes to treat love, especially divine and celestial love, to deal with it in a Platonic and not in a Christian manner. Therefore we thought that it would be better to suspend publication of such a work, at least until we could by revision turn it from Platonic to Christian.

In reference to this statement of Benivieni's, Cordier aptly remarks: "If we accept Benivieni, it was a concern for orthodoxy, corresponding to an evolution in their thought, which deterred them from publishing the *Canzone* and its *Commento*."⁴³

The fact is that Benivieni's short poem and Pico's lengthy commentary on it provide an illustration — as clean-cut as Ficino's works⁴⁴ — of the Italian Renaissance tendency to destroy the medieval "caritas-synthesis" through the absorption

⁴² Quoted by Garin in Pico, *De hominis dignitate*, p. 13.

⁴³ Cordier, p. 64. Cordier notes (p. 112) the interesting fact that some copies of the Basel (1572) edition of Pico's *Opera omnia* have Reuchlin's *De arte cabalistica* substituted for Pico's *Commento*. Is this because some felt that the *Commento* did not reflect its author's final thinking on the problem of love, and was in fact inconsistent with his later writings? That the substitution occurred merely because of orthodox circumspection seems unlikely, since Reuchlin's work hardly served as a norm of orthodoxy at the time.

⁴⁴ See especially Ficino's *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis de amore*, in his *Platonis Opera omnia quae exstant, Marsilio Ficino interprete* (Lugduni, 1590), pp. 773, 774.

of Agape into Eros. Pico's *Commento* abounds with such assertions as the following, which present pure Eros in classic terms — as acquisitive, egocentric love employed by man to carve out a path to the Divine⁴⁵:

Venus then is Beauty, whereof Love is generated, properly his Mother, because Beauty is the cause of Love, not as productive principle of this act, to Love, but as its object; the Soul being the efficient cause of it as of all his acts; Beauty the material. . . . Celestial Love is an Intellectual desire of Ideal Beauty.⁴⁶

Now few would dispute such an interpretation of Pico's *Commento* (we have already seen that Levy and Garin would consider this interpretation as adequate for Pico's entire philosophical-theological career). The question now remains: Did the mature Pico view love in this same way?

The Mature Pico

In the general introduction to this paper, we noted that Nygren treats the Renaissance as a homogeneous epoch, deals solely with Marsilio Ficino in analyzing it, and arrives at the conclusion that, just as the Reformation represents the overthrow of the medieval "caritas-synthesis" by a sole concentration upon Agape, so the Renaissance displays the breakup of this synthesis by absolute stress on Eros. To Nygren, then, the Renaissance and Agape are poles apart, and one should not find in Renaissance thinkers evidences of a love which is "spontaneous," "unmotivated," "indifferent to value," "creative of value," directed from God to man rather than from man to God, and indeed the "ini-

⁴⁵ See Nygren, pp. 175—181, 210.

⁴⁶ Gardner, pp. 29, 30.

tiator of fellowship with God."⁴⁷ It is our contention that in his later devotional writings—those produced after his contact with Savonarola had brought about a redirection of his religious life—Pico moves toward just such an Agape concept of love.⁴⁸ Let us examine each of his mature devotional productions in order to see at firsthand the view of love presented in them.

We begin with his *Commentary on Psalm Sixteen*, the only one of his psalm commentaries to appear in the collected editions of his *Opera omnia*. Apparently Pico's intention had been to produce a comprehensive work on the Psalms, but his comments on only six psalms have come down to us (four in fragmentary form), and all but the *Commentary on Psalm Sixteen* remained unpublished until recent times.⁴⁹ The very fact that Psalm Sixteen seems to have been the only psalm on which Pico produced a finished, publish-

able commentary is significant in itself. This psalm is especially strong in its theocentric emphasis—from its opening words, "Preserve me, O God, for in Thee do I put my trust," through such assertions as "O my soul, thou hast said unto the Lord, Thou art my Lord: my goodness extendeth not to thee," and "I have set the Lord always before me," to the closing verse, "Thou wilt shew me the path of life." Pico's comments are thoroughly consistent with the God-oriented character of the psalm and differ most markedly from the youthful anthropocentrism of his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. A short quotation from the *Commentary* will provide sufficient evidence in this regard:

Conserva me Domine. That is to saye, kepe me good Lorde: whiche worde kepe me: yf it be well considered: taketh awaye all occasyon of pryde. For he that is able of hym self ony thyng to gete is able of him self that same thyng to kepe. He that asketh then of God to be kepte in the state of vertue signifyeth in that askyng that from the begynnynge he gote not that vertue by hym selfe. He then whiche remembreth yt he attayned his virtue: not by his owne power but by the power of God: may not be proude thereof but rather humbled before God after those wordes of th apostle. Quid habes quod non accepisti. What hast thou that thou hast not receyved. And yf thou hast receyved hit: why arte thou proude thereof as though thou haddest not receyved it. Two wordes then be there which we sholde ever have in our mouthe: ye one. Miserere mei Deus. Have mercy on me Lorde: whan we remembre our vyce: that other. Conserva me Deus. Kepe me good Lorde: whan we remembre our vertue.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Nygren, pp. 75—81, 210.

⁴⁸ Nelson, though he attempts to present Pico's concept of love solely on the basis of the *Commento* (and thus of course finds Pico's love idea almost exclusively Platonic), vaguely suggests the true solution in his concluding statement: "Renaissance Neoplatonism tried to combine with the classical ideal of beauty the Christian ideal of religious and moral perfection. The difficulty of this fusion is shown by the fact that the preaching of a Savonarola could influence such men as Benivieni and Pico to forsake Platonistic philosophy for revivalist religion" (op. cit., p. 63).

⁴⁹ Cordier, p. 75; Pico, *De hominis dignitate*, p. 93. The difficulty of dating the Psalm fragments has led us to concentrate attention on Psalm Sixteen. However, after working with all of this material, Garin states: "When we read in their entirety Pico's religious texts and Biblical commentaries, I believe that his detachment from external forms will appear in bold relief—those forms of Ficinian Platonism which beguiled him when he wrote his *Commento*" (quoted by Cordier, loc. cit.).

⁵⁰ Rigg, p. 48 (passage translated by Sir Thomas More).

Pico's *Exposition of the Lord's Prayer* is given the most prominent position in the 1572 edition of his collected works, for it appears first in the folio volume.⁵¹ However, strange to say, it has never been translated from Latin into English. Pico begins with a short discussion of the general problem of prayer, and then treats in turn each of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer. He asserts as axiomatic: "If . . . we ought to know how we should pray, we must first learn what we should desire, for what we desire above all, that we ask to receive in our prayers." But then the question naturally arises as to how we are to know what is desirable. Pico rejects carnal affections, knowledge, prophecies, miracles, and mystic experiences (and thereby rejects the previously sought goals of his youth) and says: "But we shall ask God *not* to give us such things; instead, we shall ask Him to give us His own pure love with perfect humility." Such God-bestowed love, he argues on the basis of Luke 11:27,28, is better than having Christ in one's womb as Mary had. Then he adds the following statement, which does not greatly differ from Luther's remarks on Rom. 8:26,27: "And because we do not know when the things of life are beneficial to us and when they are not, we should wholly abandon the matter to God's judgment" (thereupon he quotes Matt. 6:8). In discussing the opening ascription, "Our Father who art in heaven," he refers to his comments on Ps. 16:1 which we have quoted above. Of the first three petitions he writes: "These first three peti-

tions concern the goodness of God, which we ought to desire far more than any personal good of our own — just as we ought to love Him above all things. . . . Therefore we should, in the first place, desire God's glory *per se*, and love His glory not merely to the extent that it is beneficial to us, but inasmuch as it is good in itself." His exposition of the last three petitions (dealing with human good) centers in "Give us this day our daily bread." Instead of giving an anthropocentric, moralistic commentary on this petition, Pico devotes a full three pages (out of the total of 11 comprising the entire treatise) to emphasizing the fact that our "bread" in the final analysis is Christ Himself. He uses John 6:51 as the basis of this argument and builds upon it a Christocentric understanding of the place of love in the Christian life: "Now we are united to God in this life through grace, which is the source (*radix*) of faith, hope, and love, and in the next life through seeing Him face to face and through experiencing the complete fruition of His goodness. All this is bestowed on us through Jesus Christ."⁵² Pico's summary statement on the Lord's Prayer well reflects the atmosphere of the entire *Exposition*:

All consideration of this Prayer is reduced to a consideration of Christ's Cross and our own death. Our own death shows us truly that we are pilgrims on earth, and the death of Christ made us sons of God; so that, thinking neither of an earthly father nor of an earthly fatherland, we may rightly say: "Our Father, who art in heaven." Our death keeps us from seek-

⁵¹ Pico, *Opera* I, leaves a1^r—a6^v. My thanks to the Newberry Library, Chicago, which kindly permitted me to use this volume in its rare book collection.

⁵² Cf. Ivan Pusino, "Ficinos und Picos religiös-philosophische Anschauungen," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, XLIV (1925), 534 and 535.

ing our own glory, for we shall soon be dust and ashes; and Christ's death makes us desire God's glory, for on our behalf He did not shrink from the disgrace of the Cross. Therefore we shall say: "Hallowed be Thy Name," as if we were saying: "Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to Thy Name give glory." Moreover, if we remember that all men swiftly perish through death, we shall want Christ to rule among them.

The *Twelve Rules of Spiritual Battle* and the *Twelve Properties of a Lover* are very brief in extent, but indicate the same movement from Eros to Agape in Pico which we have already observed. In the *Twelve Rules* we read:⁵³

Also putte not thy truste in mannes helpe but in the onely vertue of Christe Jesu whiche sayde: Truste well, for I have vaynquished the worlde. And in an other place He sayde: The prince of this worlde is caste oute thereof. Wherefore let us truste by his onely vertue, to vaynquish the worlde, and to subdue the divell. . . . Wherefore above al temptations manne or woman oughte to arme theym mooste stronglye agaynste the temptation of pryde, sens pryde is the rote of all myschyfe, agaynste the whiche the onely remedye is to thynke alway that God humbled hym selfe for us unto the crosse.

The *Twelve Properties* read as follows:⁵⁴

⁵³ Here translated by Sir Thomas Elyot (author of the *Boke of the Governour*) and included in Rigg, pp. 91, 93.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67 (translated by More). It is noteworthy that Sir Thomas More translated three of Pico's four mature devotional works, together with G. F. Pico's biography of him, and several of Pico's letters. More apparently saw in Pico's life, and especially in his final labors, a powerful testimony to the transforming effects of the Christian message.

To love one alone and contempne all other for yt one.

To thynke hym unhappy that is not with his love.

To adourne hym selfe for the pleasure of his love.

To suffre all thyng, though hit were deth, to be with his love.

To desyre also to suffre shame harme for his love, and to thynke that hurte swete.

To be with his love ever as he may, yf not in dede yet in thought.

To love all thyng yt perteyneth unto his love.

To coveite the prayse of his love and not to suffre ony dysprayse.

To beleve of his love all thynges excellent, & to desyre that all folke sholde thynke the same.

To wepe often with his love: in presence for joye, in absence for sorowe.

To languyshe ever and ever to burne in the desyre of his love.

To serve his love, nothyng thynkyng of ony rewarde or profyete.

These properties (which remind us somewhat of 1 Cor. 13) are explicitly applied to God in the following sentence: "He Himself is of all beings the best and most lovely and wisest . . . and has conferred on us the greatest favours, since He has both created us from nothing and redeemed us from hell by the blood of His Son."⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion has attempted to demonstrate that in Pico of Mirandola, one of the most striking personalities of the Italian Renaissance, a definite movement occurred from an Eros to a predominantly Agape conception of love.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 95 (translated by Rigg).

Our contention is not that Pico necessarily reached the point of pure Agape (no man, it seems safe to say, is able to achieve a complete about-face in life, since changes after all occur in the same person), but the quotations recorded above do indicate a definite alteration in general point of view.

What conclusions can be drawn from the above analysis? First of all, it appears that Pico should serve as a warning to practitioners of *Motivforskning*, for his spiritual progress demonstrates both that

individuals change and should not be too quickly categorized and that epochs cannot be characterized without the investigation of many personalities related to them. Second, Pico comes to us as a troubled representative of those agonizing years on the eve of the Reformation and reminds us that Eros and Agape posed an existential issue for some (even in Renaissance Italy) who had no personal contact with the momentous events soon to transpire north of the Alps.

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada