

Thishereness

[Erin Maglaque](#) The New York Review of Books [Vol. 47 No. 18 · 9 October 2025](#)

Review of NINE HUNDRED CONCLUSIONS by [Giovanni Pico della Mirandola](#), translated by [and Brian P. Copenhaver](#), THE GRAMMAR OF ANGELS: A SEARCH FOR THE MAGICAL POWERS OF SUBLIME LANGUAGE by [Edward Wilson-Lee](#) and INVENTING THE RENAISSANCE: MYTHS OF A GOLDEN AGE by [Ada Palmer](#).

Giovanni Pico, count of Mirandola and Concordia, was 23 when he travelled to Rome to become an angel. It was 1487. Christendom's most important priests would be there; the cleverest theologians would debate him. The pope would watch. Pico was going to dazzle them all. He planned to begin with a poetic, densely allusive speech, which almost no one would understand; then he would make nine hundred pronouncements, each more cryptic than the last, e.g. '251. The world's craftsman is a hypercosmic soul' and '385. No angel that has six wings ever changes' and '784. Doing magic is nothing other than marrying the world' and '395. Whenever we don't know the feature that influences a prayer that we pray, we should fall back on the Lord of the Nose.' In an ecstatic trance he was going to leave behind his worthless, handsome body and ascend a mystical ladder to join with the godhead, the transcendence of his soul so absolute that his body might accidentally die. This was the Death of the Kiss.

Pico didn't become an angel. He didn't get the chance. The pope thought the plan was 'contrary to the faith, erroneous, scandalous and discordant'; Pico was questioned by a papal commission, doubled down on his problematic theses and then fled to France, where he was imprisoned and narrowly escaped a heretic's death. It was only by the grace of Lorenzo de' Medici that he was allowed to return to Florence and take up a quieter life. But once Il Magnifico was dead and his son Piero was in charge – with French troops bearing down on the city and Savonarola preaching in the pulpit – not even the philosophers were safe. Pico and his friend Angelo Poliziano were assassinated. Pico was 31. Their bodies were exhumed in 2007 and poisoning by arsenic confirmed (in Pico's case, through a toenail), though the identity of their murderer remains unknown. Pico died burning up with fever; bundles of unintelligible notes were found stuffed in his cabinets. He had spent the last two years of his life lashing his flesh under Savonarola's eyes.

Pico's life touched much of what made the Renaissance the Renaissance. There were the people: Lorenzo de' Medici, a Borgia pope (Alexander VI), Savonarola. There was the arcane classical scholarship: before Pico, no Christian had studied the Jewish Kabbalah. There was his reputed physical beauty: in paintings he looked like one of Botticelli or Raphael's angels, pale and androgynous, with intricate golden curls. There was his immersion in the utterly bizarre world of Florentine Neoplatonism. He was friends with Marsilio Ficino, who taught his students to hallucinate by chewing laurel leaves while playing the lyre, who dressed up in a cape made of feathers so that he could be 'a true Orpheus'. There were love affairs with men and women; there was intrigue and – finally – murder.

The speech with which Pico planned to open his performance in Rome is popularly known as the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. The text, with its emphasis on human freedom and the intrinsic value of the individual, has been taught to generations of students as the canonical expression of the Italian Renaissance; it was 'one of the noblest legacies of that cultural epoch', according to the 19th-century historian Jacob Burckhardt, who did much to give the book its status. And yet Pico's writings, as Brian Copenhaver has persuasively shown, are in essence medieval. Enlightenment philosophes joked about fusty theologians debating angels dancing on the head of a pin: such was Pico. Voltaire described him as 'a blind man guided by blind masters'. Pico was a scholastic, and he defended medieval university philosophy against the eloquent, self-consciously innovating humanists who were his friends and lovers.

Pico never delivered his *Oration*. And it turns out that this most famous speech of the Renaissance isn't really about the dignity of man at all. It's about destroying personhood in pursuit of a melting with the One. It's a script for mystical self-annihilation, the opposite of a humanist argument for man's distinction in a secularising

age. The *Oration* contravenes the very idea of human possibility that we think the Renaissance is about – yet we think of the Renaissance this way partly because of a centuries-long misreading of it. In which case, does Pico really belong to the Renaissance? Or is our whole idea of the Renaissance hopelessly flimsy, nothing but a collection of fantasies about what it means to be modern and human?

Pico was born in 1463 in Mirandola, near Modena, to a noble family. According to family legend, a circle of flame appeared above his mother's bed. Pico was a child prodigy in Latin and Greek, with a miraculous memory. As a young teen he went to Bologna to study canon law and then roved the university towns of Italy and France seeking ever more esoteric knowledge. In Padua, he learned Hebrew and the philosophy of Averroes from the Jewish scholar Elia del Medigo. In Rome, he studied Arabic with the Sicilian Jew who went by the beautifully delusional name of Flavius Mithridates and who translated the Kabbalah into Latin for Pico. (He was eventually arrested for murder, heresy and sodomy.) When Pico arrived in Florence in 1484, Ficino had just finished, at that very hour, his translation of Plato. Ficino had a theory that the meeting was divinely ordained, and they argued over which of them was Plato reincarnated.

Pico was in his early twenties, tall, good-looking and a genius. He was also rich. He ate off silver plate. His hubris was staggering even in an age and a city known for its swagger. Pico thought he could prove that all of the world's philosophical and religious traditions were, in fact, one. He would show the secret concord between Aristotle and Plato, long debated but never demonstrated; and he would go further, to show that these ancient philosophies shared essential truths with the Kabbalah and Christian scripture. He read everybody – the Christian theologians of the Middle Ages, the Arabic philosophers, the Greeks, the Platonists, the Kabbalists, the Zoroastrians – but defended no particular school, and extracted the best from each. In 1486, he published his *Nine Hundred Conclusions*, he wrote the *Oration*, and he set off for Rome. He also issued a challenge, printed at the back of the *Conclusions*. 'The *Conclusions* will not be disputed until after Epiphany. Meanwhile they will be published in all the schools of Italy. And if any philosopher or theologian from the furthest parts of Italy wants to come and debate, this lord himself – the one who will dispute – promises to pay travel expenses.' In the *Oration*, Pico mapped the path to mystical absorption in the godhead. He began by arguing that when God came to create mankind, he decided that man should share in the qualities of every other living being. Man was a creature in between, a 'middling thing' with 'no distinct image'. Pico put words in God's mouth, imagining him in the process of creating Adam (more hubris): 'No fixed seat, no special look, nor any particular gift of your own we have given you, Adam, so that what seat, what look, what gifts you choose for yourself.' This is the part of the *Oration* that so many historians and philosophers have seen as articulating the dignity of man. Pico showed that man could choose his own way, exercising an innate freedom. Tempted by hunger, lust, low things, man can choose the way of the beasts and become 'enslaved by the senses'. Or he can strive to escape his body and search for something higher. In the most famous passage, Pico urges: 'We are not *content* with middling things ... let us climb for the heights, panting; and let us strive with all our might to reach them – since we can do it if we will it.'

When Pico wrote about reaching for the heights, he didn't mean aiming for dignity or virtue or a meaningful life. He was being literal. He was talking about climbing Jacob's ladder to God, regaining the wings our souls lost when they were dragged down by our stupid bodies. This is the part of the *Oration* that's a little less convenient for a progressive, humanist view of the Renaissance: Pico asked that we 'scorn the things of the earth, let us despise those of heaven, and then, leaving behind whatever belongs to the world, let us fly up to the hypercosmic court'. Let us become angels. The *Oration* was an instruction manual. First we must study ethics, then dialectics, natural philosophy and theology. Finally we must cultivate the self, through the study and practice of magic and the Kabbalah, before dissolving into mystical union. Pico would ascend the ladder himself while he was orating. His speech was intended as high Renaissance performance art, but that's not to say it was secular, humanist or modern – rather, it was profoundly weird.

On the way to Rome, Pico stopped off in Arezzo. There, he either kidnapped or eloped with a beautiful woman called Margherita, who happened to be the wife of a minor Medici. Her aggrieved husband said she 'was taken

against her will by the Count of Mirandola's men, was put on a horse and carried off'. Pico's sister claimed that Margherita was in love with him all along and would have followed him anywhere, no force necessary. His nephew and biographer, Gianfrancesco, glossed over the affair: 'Because of his beautiful body and handsome face many women were driven to distraction for love of him.' But Pico seems to have been driven to distraction himself. He referred to the scandal in a letter: 'Nothing is weaker than man, and nothing is more powerful than love.' He wasn't immune. But his reputation was in tatters.

He arrived in Rome with something to prove. In the *Oration* he described the body as 'a noose round the soul's neck'. He hated his own flesh but struggled to overcome its desires. In a commentary on Girolamo Benivieni's love poetry, Pico followed Plato: love is the desire for beauty. Sex with a beautiful woman is 'nothing but joining oneself to that body in the most intimate way possible'. It is a consequence of a misdirected desire for unity and wholeness; sexual desire mistakes the image of beauty for true beauty, vulgar love for heavenly love. A beautiful body is simply a shadow, a pale memory of the beauty of the One, the 'more perfect beauty which [our] souls once saw before they were immersed in bodies'. In Pico's view, erotic desire was a kind of philosophical error. A friend gossiped about the scandal in Arezzo: 'We have laughed over Paris and Helen; sometimes even the philosophers act crazily.' But was it possible to live a philosophical life without going a little crazy? Could anyone really be a Platonist through and through – especially if they were a prodigy with glossy blond curls? And anyway, what was crazier: galloping off with a Medici's wife, or attempting to defend the truths of Arabic and Jewish philosophy at the pope's feet?

Most of the *Conclusions* are elliptic; Pico thought secrecy was the point. To put their meaning on the surface would be to 'cast pearls before swine'. Some in his audience might recognise which were drawing on Aquinas, or on Plato, or Aristotle, or Plotinus, but no one would be able to follow the compressed, allusive trains of logic derived from the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides, or Pico's references to the foundational text of the Kabbalah, the *Sefer ha-Zohar*. More than six decades ago, Frances Yates wrote that Pico's *Conclusions* are 'absolutely fundamental ... for the whole Renaissance', and yet it is only now, with the appearance of Copenhaver's edition and translation, that we have a modern, usable English version of the text. Pico's enigmatic theses come in at under 17,000 words; Copenhaver uses 158,000 to explain them. This is a feat of scholarship. If you wanted to discover exactly why Pico included the propositions '253. Every soul sharing in Vulcan's intellect is sown in the moon' or '254. From the foregoing conclusion I gather why all Germans are stoutly built and pale in colour,' Copenhaver makes it possible. (Together they constitute a joke, drawn from a web of references, including to Proclus, Porphyry, Caesar and Tacitus, about astrological influences on geography and character.) But it's also possible to read the *Conclusions* in a trance-like state, as a swine grubbing at pearls, perhaps. Piled up they begin to make a certain aphoristic sense:

673. If happiness lies in fulfilment by theorising, mathematical subjects do not make for happiness.

75. Any individual whatever is an individual by an individual difference of its own called a *thishereness*.

712. Whether an angelic nature is in some sense everything.

446. The wayfarer's theology – as the wayfarer's – must be called unqualifiedly practical.

If the first rungs of Pico's ladder to mystical self-annihilation were fairly typical – moral philosophy, dialectic – the last rungs were subjective, arts cultivated for the abolition of the self. In a section of 'Magical Conclusions', Pico distinguishes between two kinds of magic: the evil kind that summons demons; and natural magic, which makes visible the secret ways in which the earth is joined to heaven, the 'mutual rapports running through all nature, the secret charms by which one thing can be drawn to another', as Yates puts it. Magic allowed Pico to access the deeper structural oneness of the created universe, a oneness obscured by the perceptible world. Magic, incantation, Orphic music: all moved him into the frenzy necessary for self-dissolution.

Edward Wilson-Lee's *The Grammar of Angels* takes up Pico's interest in ecstatic states. It's not a biography of Pico (too bad, since we could do with a fresh one in English) but a wide-ranging cultural history of mesmeric

sound, from Plato to the Renaissance, loosely organised around Pico's work. We are reminded of Plato's just-so story from *Phaedrus*. Those who encountered the music and dance of the Muses were so enraptured that they forgot to eat and subsequently died. The Muses transformed them into cicadas, creatures which make hypnotic, incantatory noise from birth to death. And then there is Poliziano's libretto for *Orfeo*, an opera which ends with a group of bloodthirsty women tearing Orpheus limb from limb while chanting nonsensical dithyrambs to Dionysus. Wilson-Lee argues that Pico was intellectually intrepid, asking questions about the nature of the created universe – and about how to alter the fabric of one's own existence – that others hadn't dared ask; that his experiments with self-annihilation, especially by means of manic speech, magic and music, were audacious beyond those of his most imaginative contemporaries. But Pico himself proves elusive, and flickers in and out of view.

The quest for dissolution led Pico to the Kabbalah. The Ten Commandments revealed to Moses were only the first law. The second law was a spoken revelation passed from God to Moses to Ezra, who wrote it up in seventy books: these formed the Kabbalah, a scripture so sacred and esoteric that, according to Jewish tradition, you had to be forty before you could study it. Pico, in his early twenties, found in these books the core tenets of Christianity: the Trinity, the Incarnation, Christology. He wanted to Christianise the mystical heart of the Jewish faith, to show that Jews were wrong not to accept Christ. And he wanted to show that these ideas were present in ancient philosophies, too; that there was a hidden harmony between, for example, Platonic triads and the Trinity of the Kabbalah that would prove the truth of the Christian Trinity. This was deeply antisemitic scholarship; it was also bold and totally original. The Kabbalah offered its own magic. When God created the universe, he spoke Hebrew. Hebrew letters – their shapes, lines, correlation with numbers – could form the subject of mystical contemplation: '388. There are no letters in the whole Law that do not exhibit secrets of the ten numberings in forms, ligatures, separations, twisting, straightness, defect, excess, smallness, greatness, crowning, closing, opening and sequence.'

It wasn't surprising that, to the pope, the *Conclusions* stank of heresy. Pico had 'dredged up the errors of pagan philosophers long since abolished' and the pope asked him to defend his propositions in front of a commission. Pico was furious. He published an *Apology* which was nothing of the sort. He wrote it in twenty days and twenty nights, fuelled by spite. Nobody comes off well:

He rebuked me violently while holding a rather big book in his hand and asking, how dare you, how can you defend Origen? ...

Bring your witness on, reverend sir, I said, if you have the balls.

The witness is a big one, he said.

'I must change my way of speaking,' Pico sneered. 'I'm talking to barbarians, and as the proverb neatly puts it, stammerers understand only those who stammer.' This was not the wisest strategy when being investigated for heresy. The *Conclusions* was the first book to be banned by the papacy, more than fifty years before the creation of the Index of Prohibited Books. Meanwhile, in Florence, Ficino and Lorenzo de' Medici mused that a 'harmony of the heavenly bodies which portends a safe and easy life is so different from one which promises glory or pre-eminence in virtue'.

According to his nephew, Pico spent the rest of his short life in Florence chastened, meek, intensely spiritual. No more married women. No more public feuds. 'Until then,' Gianfrancesco remembered, 'he longed for glory while false love fuelled his fires and the wiles of women stirred them up.' Pico threw five books of his love poems into the fire. Poliziano – with whom Pico had once flirted ('who wouldn't wish to die on the end of your sword?') – threw his own erotic poetry on the pyre, too. Protesting a little too much, Gianfrancesco suggested that Pico's life was still a model, that he was all the more human for being a 'teacher who [had] turned toward paths of justice and away from broken trails of desire'. Pico gave away most of his money (though he couldn't give up the silver plate). Like many people in Florence, he was enthralled by Savonarola. But he still wrote arcane works of philosophy: the *Heptaplus*, on the Genesis story; *On Being and the One*, dedicated to Poliziano,

reconciling Plato and Aristotle; and the *Disputations*, a work arguing against astrology as a determining influence on human character and fate.

While he was dying, the Virgin visited him in his dreams. After he was dead, Savonarola bragged in a sermon that Pico ‘used to come to me and reveal his secrets’, but ‘since he was ungrateful for God’s generosity ... or else because he was enchanted by the senses, he shirked his task.’ Savonarola had asked God to punish Pico so that he would find true faith – but he hadn’t meant for him to die. Pico was buried with Poliziano in San Marco. Four decades later, the love poet Benivieni was buried in the same tomb. Savonarola knew that Pico was in purgatory, and Gianfrancesco agreed. In 1940, Giovanni Papini – who wrote a history of Italian literature dedicated to Mussolini – fantasised about holding Pico’s skull in his hands. ‘Out falls a speck of dust,’ he wrote, ‘the last mortal residue of the organ for thinking that stupefied the world.’

In his biography of Pico, published in 1937, Eugenio Garin wrote that he was ‘tormented by the discomfort of a dying era, troubled by problems of an age being born, manifesting in himself, the soul of the Italian Renaissance’. If true, this would mean that Pico helps answer a question that historians still struggle with: what made the Renaissance the Renaissance? In *Inventing the Renaissance*, Ada Palmer tries to identify what was distinctive about the period. Or, as she puts it, what was the ‘X factor’ that explains the transformations we perceive as unique to the age? She combines multiple approaches, circling through the period fifteen times, exploring the way 19th and 20th-century historians created myths of Renaissance exceptionalism; the way contemporary historians have systematically taken apart these myths; the way individual life stories, such as those of Alessandra Strozzi, or Machiavelli, or Michelangelo, or Poliziano, trouble some of the central assumptions underlying the idea of a Renaissance golden age; and – in the most persuasive section of the book – she examines the way debates about Renaissance humanism help us see what, exactly, was new in Italy in the 15th century.

By the end we are not left with much of a Renaissance at all. Palmer wants to ‘scrape off the glitter’, and she does. Her insistence that historians are always in the process of making history – her shorthand for historiographical debate is ‘the History Lab’ – works to undermine any sense that the distinctiveness of the Renaissance can be attributed to one big idea, such as the invention of double-entry bookkeeping, or capitalism, or individualism, or classicising art, or atheism. The Italian Renaissance had nothing that medieval Italy didn’t already possess: ‘All the key qualities were there, currents of trade, art, thought, finance and statecraft, but add some Ever-So-Much-More-So and the intensity increases, birthing an era great and terrible.’ Great, because of all the art and glitter; terrible, because of the endless violence and instability across the peninsula.

Palmer makes the historiography intelligible; she introduces a wide range of characters and anecdotes and lesser-known details, and because of this, the book is a useful introduction to the period. But I found it unbearable to read. The writing is often patronising and silly: from the epithets (calling the Florentine Priori ‘Nine Dudes in a Tower’) to the made-up dialogue (‘Machiavelli: WTF?!?!’) to the use of the word ‘badass’ to describe the mercenary Federico da Montefeltro. Sometimes she is simply confusing, as when she tries to ‘ground’ us in historical time by mapping Renaissance chronology onto modern, so we get unhelpful sentences such as ‘Pope Paul’s death in 1471 = 1971 saw the rise of Sixtus IV (Battle Pope!), so the political turmoil around the Pazzi Conspiracy corresponds to Watergate’ – which prompts a surreal image of a Medici bleeding to death on the steps of a DC hotel. There are many, many exclamation marks (Michelangelo’s *David* is ‘super naked!!!’) and dollar signs and theatrically spelled words (‘The Renaissance was ... loooooong’; scholasticism was ‘increeeeeeeedibly booooooring’ – I counted the vowels). There are spoiler alerts for things that happened five hundred years ago. There are flights of fancy that veer into farce, as when Palmer imagines Machiavelli weeping at Florence acquiring Unesco protected status and then imagines herself weeping for Machiavelli weeping. Throughout, she writes about herself in a cloying third person, most notably in a chapter titled ‘Why did Ada Palmer start studying the Renaissance?’ Readers surely deserve less excruciating forms of enthusiasm for the subject.

The tone is odd, because Palmer is a respected intellectual historian, and when she turns to the problem of Renaissance humanism the book is compelling. What were intellectuals such as Pico, Poliziano and Ficino actually doing – and was it new? Palmer suggests that ‘humanism’ – evoking a cluster of modern values and virtues such as human agency, reason, compassion – is not a useful term. Rather we ought to talk about the *umanisti*, the contemporary term for the men who taught a particular programme of Latin and Greek literary scholarship. In the mid-20th century, Paul Oskar Kristeller (who introduced Pico’s *Oration* to an Anglophone readership in a book called *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*) argued that there was no moral core to humanism; humanism was just grammar and philology, a methodology for editing classical texts that was novel but not ideological. As a young scholar, Kristeller was the general editor for two series of books for the Scuola Normale in Pisa, one on philosophy and one on literature; Garin submitted his biography of Pico to the former series, and Kristeller published it in the latter. Humanism was a literary methodology, not a coherent moral outlook.

Perhaps the most influential recent reassessment of humanism has been made by the historian James Hankins. In *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (2019), Hankins argued that humanism did look beyond matters of language and style, that humanist scholars and their patrons wanted nothing less than the moral transformation of their society, ‘to rebuild Europe’s depleted reserves of good character, true piety and practical wisdom’ by studying the classics for what they could teach about virtue. Palmer takes a broader view, following Johannes Helmuth in arguing that a humanist ‘is someone with the ability to activate antiquity’, to ‘draw a new line between present and past’. This allows her to include, for example, Nicolosa Castellani Sanuti, who dressed herself as an embodiment of ancient virtues but never published about them. Christopher Celenza’s definition, included in Palmer’s book, is also good: ‘A humanist is someone who receives a letter from Erasmus.’

And then there is the problem of sincerity. When humanists wrote about revivifying ancient virtue, did they really mean it? Or were they merely jobbing scholars who would write whatever their patrons asked them to? Was it all just glitter? ‘Would we want to know what was in their hearts,’ Palmer asks, and if we could know, would it matter? She encourages us to pay attention to Ficino’s account of Cosimo de’ Medici’s dying days, as related to his grandson Lorenzo. On his deathbed Cosimo had called Ficino to his side: ‘Even till the last day when he departed from this world of shadows to go to the light, he devoted himself to the acquisition of knowledge. For when we had read together from Plato’s book ... [he] soon quitted this life.’ Cosimo died listening to Ficino reading from Plato. Maybe there isn’t a *there* to the Renaissance, no single ‘X factor’, but the orchestration of such a scene – in life and in literature – is distinctive; it is the turning of experience into a particular kind of art.

I think Garin was right. There is an existential struggle in Pico’s story, a microcosm of the story of the Renaissance: the ending of one way of life and the beginning of another. But Pico’s isn’t only a story about old versus new, or scholasticism versus humanism, or mysticism versus modern subjectivity. In his book dedicated to Poliziano, *On Being and the One*, Pico described the problem himself. ‘See the madness that grips us, Angelo,’ he wrote, addressing his friend. ‘While we are in the body, we can love God better than we can describe or know him ... Yet instead of loving we always prefer to get knowledge and never find what we seek.’ Pico wanted to love God, but he couldn’t stop asking questions. ‘688. How does God intelligise?’ ‘720. When will the end of time come?’ ‘732. Which natures are suited to be made happy?’ One day he would work through all the questions, and then ‘we shall be winged lovers, driven wild by desire and transported beyond ourselves.’ Pico would leave behind his desiring body, and his beautiful books, and take flight.