



Title	The Humanistic Elements of Self : A Study of More's Life of Pico
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Citation	待兼山論叢. 文学篇. 1998, 32, p. 17-30
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://hdl.handle.net/11094/47910
rights	
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The Humanistic Elements of Self

—A Study of More's *Life of Pico*—

Nobuhiro KAWASHIMA

Introduction

In the traditional criticism, biography has been supposed to be written objectively. Thus, Harold Nicolson repudiated Renaissance commemorative and exemplary biography as "impure", admitting the subjective figments in it. Yet it is important to reconsider this "impurity" of biography, since it expresses clearly the attitude of Renaissance people toward life and their conceptions of self. My working hypothesis is that Renaissance biography should epitomise the growth of notions of individualism: the elements of modern self can be traced, by analysing episodes and features written in biography; moreover, by making a comparison of the contents of biographies and checking out which factors are maintained, added, omitted, or altered, the transformation of self through the stages of the Renaissance can be also pursued. As virtually the first English-written biography, Thomas More's *Life of Pico* gives us a suitable point to start a discussion about Renaissance English biography.

Though being the first publication of Thomas More, the *Life of Pico* has been woefully neglected by the modern reader¹⁾. It is true that the *Life of Pico* is not More's original work but his translation, yet we should not overlook the significance of this work. Firstly, as Walter Pater argues, it has "some touch of sweetness" and "may still be read, in its quaint, antiquated English" (23). Secondly, written before his marriage to Jane Colt, it reveals More's ambiguous attitude toward life. Thirdly and most importantly, a sign of change from medieval to modern life can be recognised in it, since it conveys both components of two literary genres: hagiography, the medieval type

of biography which narrates the life of saints; and biography, the modern type which recounts the life of laymen²).

Before discussing the *Life of Pico* itself, the first section of this paper reconsiders the definition of a human being by following Pico's life and thoughts, which will give us a deeper insight into the nature of Renaissance biography. The next section surveys the content and form of the *Life of Pico* and defines whether they are hagiographical or biographical, in other words, Christian or humanistic. We will find that Thomas More was swinging like a pendulum between Christian medieval life and humanistic modern life. The final section pursues the development of humanistic self by considering how Pico's life was received and transformed in Tudor and Stuart England.

I. Chameleon-man

Pico della Mirandola was one of the most remarkable Italian scholars, born in 1463. In his youth, he visited all the universities in Italy and France, seeking every kind of philosophy available at his time. Thus, Pico had led a typically humanistic life, until he was accused of heresy owing to unorthodox ideas implicit in the *Nine Hundred Theses*. In the theses, he ambitiously attempted to combine Christian doctrines with an incredible variety of philosophical and mystic ones: those of medieval Latin and Arabic philosophers, Greek Platonism and Aristotelianism, the Pythagorean, the Chaldeans, Hermes Trismegistus, and the Cabala.

Discussing the nature of a human being in his famous *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Pico fabricates a biblical scene in which God speaks directly to Adam about how the first man has been created:

We have set thee at the world's centre that thou mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world. We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honour, *as though the maker and moulder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.*

(Pico 224, emphasis added)

This is the famous passage that Jacob Burckhardt adored as an exam-

ple of discovery of man in the Renaissance. It is true that here in this passage we can admit the central ideas of "humanism": the dignity and freedom of man, anthropocentricism. But we should notice that, in admiring man's uniqueness and freedom, Pico also accentuates the "chameleon-like" uncertain mobility of man's state and the idea of self-fashioning³). Because of this protean nature, Pico continues to argue that a human being has a possibility to "be born anew to the divine likeness", but at the same time has a risk to "sink into a beast" (Pico 224).

Oscillating between hope to promote and fear to demote, people must have felt an obligation to fashion themselves as good. In doing so, they sought and imitated the model of distinguished men. In the Middle Ages, they did not have to seek a model for good living: they followed exclusively the life of Jesus Christ. In this religious atmosphere, Thomas à Kempis wrote the *Imitation of Christ*. In the Renaissance, however, the sovereign reign of Christ over the spirits of people got weakened and they began to feel free to choose various other paths. Pico argues in the oration that, so as to lead a new philosophical life, our life should be fashioned to the exemplar of Cherubim, not of Christ. Besides, Pico declares that he was opened up to every kind of style of living depicted in the humanistic books.

It was quite natural that the necessity of imitating others and self-fashioning caused the development of biography during the Renaissance. Burckhardt claims that in Renaissance Italy "the search for the characteristic features of remarkable men" became dominant, and that "under the influence of the prevailing conception of fame", biography began to change from the type of medieval hagiography to the new type to celebrate the life of laymen (214). Although Burckhardt discusses as if the change of biography was a faithful reflection of the emergence of new kind of men, we could also think otherwise: biography itself might have the performative power to make new individuals; biography might have functioned not only descriptively by celebrating notable persons, but also prescriptively by encouraging people to lead a worldly life. Indeed, biography is

a precious chart to show us the way to follow in the vast unknown ocean called life.

On the other hand, we should not fail to notice that in the fifteenth century it was too early to declare like Alexander Pope: "Know thyself, presume not God to scan; the proper study of mankind is man". The separation from the imitation of Christ, as Stephen Greenblatt argues, could also "give rise to considerable anxiety" (3). Thus the humanists at the outset of the Renaissance were torn asunder between the modern way of worldly humanistic life and the medieval Christian living. However hard Pico might try to get out, he was still under the influence of Christ. Actually, after the imputation of heresy, he moved to Florence, where he got converted to lead a pious Christian life under the influence of a zealous preacher, Savonarola. Finally, just before his death in 1494, he determined to devote his life to Christianity. In the former part of his career, Pico was full of ambition and led a humanistic life, but in the latter part, the change passed over him, and he died as a religious man. Thus, Pico's life betrays ambivalence toward the possibility of new way of humanistic living. In the next section, I would like to analyse how the ambivalent Pico's life was translated by Thomas More.

II. Janus-Faced Life

Two years after his death, Pico's nephew Gianfrancesco collected and published his works. As an introduction to the works, he wrote a brief life of Pico (*vita pici*), which is the very biography Thomas More translated. Under the title of *The Life of John Picus*, however, More translates not only the *vita*, but also a selection from Pico's work: three of Pico's epistles, the commentary on Psalm 15, and his prayer to God. It also includes More's verse translation of the Pico's duodecalogues: "The Twelve Rules of Spiritual Battle"; "The Twelve Weapons of Spiritual Battle"; "The Twelve Properties of a Lover". Furthermore, More makes so many alterations to the original text that we can discern his own intention in the translation.

In the first part of the *Life* which More adds as a dedication to

Joyce Leigh, Thomas More states concisely his own intention of sending her the book. Criticising the general carnality of new year's gifts ("either to be fed or to be clad or some other wise delighted"), More emphasises spirituality of his present: "sith that all faithful people are rather spiritual than carnal" (More 51). He continues to explain her how to use the *Life*: "The works are such that truly good sister I suppose of the quantity there commeth none in your hand more profitable: neither to the achieving of temperance in prosperity / nor to the purchasing of patience in adversity / nor to the despising of worldly vanity / nor to the desiring of heavenly felicity" (52). If we take More's words expressed here at face value, we have to conclude his intention to translate the *Life of Pico* was highly Christian.

Also behind the omissions More makes, we can admit his religious intention to write it as a devotional work. By comparing More's translation to the original Latin text, Stanford E. Lehmborg points out that More cuts the considerable parts which are not suitable for a nun, Joyce Leigh. That is, most of the explanations of Pico's mystic and humanistic work are contracted. From the fact, Judith P. Jones argues that "More wanted to emphasize Pico's spiritual transformation and devotion rather than his academic accomplishment" (42). Therefore, though some have claimed that it is the first biography in English, the *Life of Pico* has been regarded as a medieval hagiography rather than as a modern biography.

This definition of the *Life of Pico* as a religious hagiography seems enhanced by More's Christian tone of denial of pride and pleasure. In translating Pico's life, More keeps the focus of the original text on how Pico refrained from pleasure: he translates faithfully the section "Of the voluntary affliction and paining of his own body". In this section, Pico is admired as a man who whipped his own body so as to abstain from sexual pleasure. More's principle of anthologising Pico's work is also religious: the three letters are concerned with pride and pleasure; psalm 15 is also about pride and pleasure; More's verse translation of Pico's three duodecalogues instructs us how to keep away from pleasure. However, we have to keep it in mind that

the idea of pride which had been the cardinal sin in the medieval world was changing gradually in More's time. People began to accept the positive aspects of pride: the worldly ambition to be famous, which gave birth to individualism. We have to look more carefully into how More treats the sin of pride.

In *Last things*, one of his devotional works, More is apparently opposed to the sin of pride. There he refuses it as an origin of other sins. In the *Life*, however, his attitude toward pride is not so simple. It is true that More, also in the *Life*, puts stress on the seriousness of the sin of pride, but at the same time, he is reluctant to make a final judgement on the sin. In narrating the accusation of heresy against Pico, More adds his own comment and explains that he deserved the imputation because of "his high mind and proud purpose" (More 58), his worldly ambition to win fame. If he had stopped the comment here, we could say that More's comment sounds perfectly didactic and religious. Nevertheless he keeps on commenting that since "there had he much work to keep himself upright", "he ran not in perpetual infamy and scandal" (58). This comment suggests that Pico's sin of pride was not mortal but could be washed away. From this vagueness, we can assume that though fully aware of the seriousness of the sin of pride, young More, himself as a budding humanist, could not hold a firm position on Pico's pride.

More's indefinite attitude toward the sin of pride can be also seen in the final part of the life, the description of Pico's death. Here the original text itself is indecisive, but we can say that More is also uncertain how to describe Pico's death, because he does not change but takes over the ambivalent narrative of the original text. On the one hand, More is rather critical about Pico's death that he should translate a passage from Savonarola's sermon which states that Pico's soul is not in heaven now, but burned in purgatory, because of his negligence to enter a monastery and his choice to lead a worldly life. Here, More seems to agree with Savonarola on the point that Pico suffered in purgatory due to his sin of pride. On the other hand, More does not forget celebrating Pico's death by translating the

episode of "the great benignity and singular courtesy of Charles king of France": King Charles sent him two physicians as ambassadors when he heard of his sickness (More 72). Here again, Thomas More hesitates forming a confident judgement on Pico's worldly life, by narrating Pico's death ambiguously.

Thus, More seems to have faced great difficulty in coping with Pico's fame and talent as a great scholar, whereas he theoretically knew the meaning of the sin of pride in Christian world. However spiritually More might try to translate the *Life*, we can find in it another narrative which tells us the excellence and exploits of Pico's learning. As Lehmborg claims, More contracted considerably the description of Pico's humanistic work. Yet it is also true that More translates some parts of Gianfrancesco's celebration of Pico's great learning: "Of his setting forth to school and study in humanity", "Of his study in philosophy and divinity", and "Of his learning universally". The section entitled "Five causes that in so short time brought him to so marvellous cunning" expresses most clearly More's concern with Pico's learning: from which, the reader can learn five causes to be a good scholar like Pico: "an incredible wit", "a marvellous fast memory", "great substance...to the buying of his books as well Latin as Greek and other tongues", "busy and infatigable study", and "the despising of all earthly things" (More 63).

Therefore, the simple definition of the *Life of Pico* as a hagiography is unsatisfactory. The *Life of Pico* is not an exclusive hagiography. As Jones discusses, "More is moving toward a kind of biography different from what he found in his models" (43). It includes the description of humanistic concern as well as Christian. His concern is, after all, as Alistair Fox points out, divided between Pico's humanistic learning and Christian virtue, "in such a way as to juxtapose his *eruditio* and *pietas*, his worldliness and spirituality" (24). Indeed, in the introductory part, More highlights Pico's "marvelous cunning and excellent virtue" (More 53). From this juxtaposed phrase, we may say that Thomas More admired not only Pico's virtue (the life of Christian), but also his cunning (the life of scholar, human-

ist).

More's interest in Pico's humanistic writings is revealed in his verse translation of Pico's duodecalogue. In "The Twelve Weapons of Spiritual Battle" which is mainly composed for a devotional reason, we can find a very humanistic theme. More paraphrases Pico's short remark, "*Hominis dignitas & natura*", as follows:

The nature and dignity of man

Remember how god hath made thee reasonable

Like unto his Image and figure

And for the suffered pains intolerable

That he or angel never would endure.

Regard o man thine excellent nature.

Thou that with angel art made to be equal

For very shame be not the devil's thrall.

(More 111-112)

More mingles here the Christian theme of avoiding pleasure with the humanistic theme of both the dignity of man and the protean nature of man. We should also note that More repeats exactly the same thing Pico depicted in his humanistic oration. While intending to write a devotional work, More must have felt an undeniable sympathy for Pico's humanistic thought and could not help inserting the modern idea of individualism into the religious verse.

Furthermore, there is a clearly biographical element in the *Life*. The section titled "Of his person" gives us a beautiful portrait of young Pico. Although it is a faithful translation of Gianfrancesco's original Latin passage, More's English rendering is itself a happy celebration of the modern individualism.

He was of feature and shape seemly and beauteous / of statue goodly and height: of flesh tender and soft / his visage lovely and fair / his colour white intermingled with comely ruddies / his yen [eyes] gray and quick of look / his teeth white and even / his hair yellow and not too piked. (More 55)

It is no wonder that this beautiful portrait of young philosopher attracted Walter Pater, the great aesthete. Pater quotes this passage as a picture of a modern man in his elegant work, *The Renaissance*.

Then, we have to consider what form Thomas More chooses in translating the *Life*. His alteration of the form is apparent: More divided the linear narrative of Gianfrancesco's text into thirty distinguished sections. Anthony S. G. Edwards claims that this reorganization is done according to "the design of the work as a meditative or exemplary life appropriate for study by a religious" (xlv). But I would like to argue that this rhetorical technique to divide the narrative into sections comes from his study of humanities. Discussing how man's life should be commended, Thomas Wilson, a famous rhetorician of the Renaissance, recommends in *The Art of Rhetoric*, a methodology to divide man's life into several parts, following the lesson of Quintilian (54). It is very probable that Thomas More followed this humanistic lesson in translating the undivided original narrative.

To sum up, the *Life of Pico* is mainly written as a hagiography, but some contents and its form bear biographical tints. In More's time, humanistic learning and its fame came to be regarded as new elements of self, though those of Christian were still predominant. More could not adopt a resolute stance on these new elements of self in translating the *Life of Pico*. Thus, the *Life* leaves room for us to have the impression that it is a humanistic biography, in spite of his intention to make a devotional hagiography. It is, after all, about the life of Christian humanist, Pico della Mirandola, and translated by Christian humanist, Thomas More. This double process of mingling Christian and humanistic living makes the *Life* more complicated than it seems. The *Life of Pico* might be said as Janus-faced, in a sense that it is looking back to the medieval Christian living and at the same time looking forward to the modern humanistic living.

III. Mirror of anamorhosis

Because of the ambivalence, reading of *Life of Pico* depends completely on the viewpoint of the reader. The reader who believes in the integrity of personality of Thomas More has a tendency to read it as a hagiography, assuming that the Christian spirit appeared

clearly in his later life had always been in his inner self through his career. On the other hand, the reader who wants to view Thomas More as a great humanist has a tendency to read it as a biography, showing a good example of More's interests in humanistic learning.

The tradition of Morean criticism tries to locate the *Life of Pico* in the critical condition of More in which he could not choose between secular and sacred life. Cresacre More, More's great grandson, explains why he got interest in Pico's life as follows:

Finding his body for all his austerities ready still to endanger his soul,... he determined to marry; and therefore he propounded to himself, as a *pattern of life*, a singular layman John Picus Earl of Mirandola, who was a man famous for virtue, and most eminent of learning.

(Cited in Lehmborg in 61: emphasis added)

Thus Cresacre explains that his great grandfather took Pico's life as a model of great humanist. It is a very fascinating theory that More needed a model for good living and translated the biography of Pico as "a pattern of life". After all, admired as a great humanist in England, Thomas More was not immune to the anxiety of separation from Jesus Christ, either. Thus he could not help imitating Pico as a model for the new way of good living, the life of Christian humanist. The *Life of Pico* had, therefore, a strong influence on More's self-formation.

In the introductory part of the life, More himself suggests the necessity of imitating Pico's life by using a theatrical metaphor: "I shall therefore to [*sic*] as I can briefly *rehearse* you his whole life (More 53, emphasis added)". Moreover, he compares Pico's life as "a spectacle" or "a clear polished mirror" to look in (53). Yet, we have to revise this metaphor. For the life does not show us a clear single reflection. Practically the *Life of Pico* is neither a good example of religious living (Pico's soul is in purgatory) nor a good instance of humanistic life (More deliberately cuts the parts concerned with Pico's humanistic works). What it gives us is only a halfway fusion of these two. If we look at it from a different angle, the mirror will bear a new aspect. While Cresacre thought that More took Pico as

a model of layman, we have already known that More himself thought of Pico as a model of Christian virtue. Therefore, the *Life of Pico* is not just a mirror but a mirror of anamorphosis.

It is interesting to examine how Pico's life, the ambivalent life of a Christian humanist, was received by other Renaissance people. Most of the Renaissance writers seem to have been unable to hold as ambivalent a vision as Thomas More in the *Life of Pico*. They had a tendency to read and take it monolithically, either as a devotional life or a humanistic life. Because of it, the shift from medieval to modern, from Christian to humanistic, can be best conveyed by juxtaposing different readings of Pico's life and thought. Firstly, at the former part of the sixteenth century, Thomas Elyot, one of More's friends, also made a prose translation of Pico's duodecalogue: "The Twelve Rules in Spiritual Battle". The important fact is that this prose translation got included in an appendix to a new edition of the *Imitation of Christ* as a good example of the imitator of Christ. This means that, in the sixteenth century, at least just after More's death, Pico was respected as a pious Christian rather than as an excellent scholar. People at the first stage of the humanism still held steadily to the Christian way of living.

Secondly, in the seventeenth century, at the mature stage of humanism, Pico became a symbol of good humanistic scholar. We have already seen that Cresacre More thought of Pico as "a singular layman" rather than a pious Christian. In narrating *The Life of John Donne*, Izaak Walten refers to Pico's name as an emblem of excellent scholar:

He ... in his eleventh year, was sent to the University of Oxford, having at the time a good command both of the French and Latin tongue. This, and some other of his remarkable abilities, made one then give this censure of him: That this age had brought forth *another Picus Mirandula*; of whom story says, that he was rather born than made wise by study.

(Walton 23, emphasis added)

Here, obviously, Pico is regarded as a model of great humanist. From these facts, we can surmise that Pico's Janus-faced life was received

firstly at the outset of humanism as highly Christian, and gradually according to the development of humanism and individualism, came to be regarded as a good example of humanist. This shows that the humanistic elements of self became more dominant than those of Christian on the self-formation of Renaissance people.

Conclusion

In the early Renaissance, separated from the influence of Christ, people needed to have new worldly models to follow. This necessity caused the rapid development of exemplary biography in the Renaissance. Under this request, the *Life of Pico* was formulated, and translated by Thomas More. We could say that the *Life of Pico* is the prototype of modern biography that applauds the humanistic learning as elements of self. The separation from the imitation of Christ, however, was not so fully completed at the first stage of the Renaissance that this biography remains mainly hagiographical: it apparently emphasises the Christian elements of Pico's life. Yet at the same time, into the religious narrative, the humanistic elements of Pico's life are inserted, and it is also framed in the form of humanistic tradition, as a result of which the *Life of Pico* becomes deeply ambivalent. This is why it causes various readings and remains "one of the most vexed questions of More scholarship" (Fox 27).

We have also seen that Pico's representation had changed from a pious Christian to a great humanist in Tudor and Stuart England. This alteration indicates that the budding humanistic self at the outset of the Renaissance had come to be emphasised, and bloomed gradually through the stages of the Renaissance. Given the fact, the *Life of Pico* is one of the precious works which records a state of equilibrium between hope of new individualism and fear of separation from Christ.

Notes

- 1) Until *The Yale Edition of The Complete Works of St. Thomas More (CW)* has recently been completed in 1997, the text we could easily access

was only the black-letter edition of *English Works* published by William Rastell in 1557. Due to the publication of the volume 1 of *CW*, however, it has become possible for us to read easily the *Life of Pico*. In addition to that, *CW1* also includes More's Latin sources, Gianfrancesco's *vita* and selection from Pico's works, and their modern English translations. Therefore this edition also helps us to compare More's translation with Latin original. The text of the *Life of Pico* I quote in this paper comes from this edition, but I modernise More's old spelling for the sake of simplicity.

- 2) The term, biography, was first used by John Dryden in his preface to the translation of Plutarch (*OED*). The writers in the Renaissance were, therefore, writing just a history of lives without considering whether it is biography or hagiography. This causes a difficulty in the definition of the *Life of Pico*.
- 3) It is important to note here that the idea of self-fashioning which Stephen Greenblatt argues is clearly stated by Pico. My aim is to reconsider it in the context of Renaissance biography.

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