

### Eva del Soldato

*Simone Porzio: Un aristotelico tra natura e grazia.* Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2010. xvi + 352 pp., ISBN 978-88-6372-275-8.

The volume provides an accurate reconstruction of the entire intellectual career of Simone Porzio, Neapolitan philosopher and physician, and keen interpreter of Aristotle, alive in the first half of the sixteenth century. In his time, Porzio was sufficiently well known and appreciated (also in Europe) to be sought after by Duke Cosimo of Tuscany (who wanted him as professor in his Pisa studio) and the Viceroy Pedro of Toledo, who grudgingly accepted his departure from Naples, but demanded his return in order that his Magisterium might enrich the Neapolitan university. After his death (1554), Porzio was consigned to a thankless fate: when not forgotten altogether, he was remembered mainly as an imitator of Pietro Pomponazzi. He was regarded in this way by intellectuals of the calibre of Tasso, Mersenne (who, not without contempt, counts the writings of Porzio and Pomponazzi among the “works much admired by the unholy deists”), Bayle and Malebranche. Brucker, in his *Historia critica philosophiae*, regards him as “maxime vero inter discipulos famosum Pomponatii” (among the best of Pomponazzi’s most famous pupils). He figures as a student of Peretto in the *Encyclopedie* and in the great directories compiled in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Such misleading prejudices, together with a biography often full of voids, and an overall knowledge of his output that extends no further than the best known works have not, in the past, encouraged many attempts to write an “accomplished monograph” on Porzio (advocated by Guido Calogero). Not surprisingly, the critical bibliography of the last century, while yielding essays of great value (F. Fiorentino, G. Saitta, E. Garin, C. Vasoli and D. Facca etc.) tended, for the most part, to analyse specific aspects of his thought.

A patient archive search allowed Del Soldato to uncover rare and unpublished texts by the Neapolitan philosopher – in the *Appendix*, the reader will find the transcription of the manuscripts: *De la perfection delli occhi*, *De la perfectione della mano* and *Dubbi circa gl'effetti d'amore sopra le parole del Petrarca in quel sonetto “Quando giugne per gl'occhi al cor profondo”* – which, together with the news contained in the many epistles unknown before now, made it possible to restore Porzio to his rightful place in early modern culture and science.

Combining biography and textual hermeneutics – philosophy and theology texts, but also “moral and ethical writings and others on animals, treatises on love and catalogues of fishes, works in an anti-metaphysical cast and comments for prayers” [p. xi] – the author recreates the profile of a versatile and original intellectual. She also uses the *reportationes* of his university teaching. These

documents are valuable for understanding the stages of Porzian exegesis of Aristotelian works, allowing the reader to follow the progressive maturation of the opinions of the Neapolitan physician and professor, discussed in their “natural place”, that is, “in the world of university Aristotelianism – and therefore of genuine Aristotelianism”. The *reportationes* give a measure of how Porzio regarded the *lectio* as “a kind of laboratory for measuring and testing interpretations that only after long maturation would be entrusted to print” (p. xiv). Should we cite just one case, this is evident, from the content of the lectures on *De anima*, which becomes the core of the drafting of *De mente humana*.

The rigorous methodological approach adopted in the monograph has produced results of considerable importance. It has, for example, allowed a refusal of the shared opinion that Porzio was a pupil of Peretto. There is in fact no proof of a direct relationship between the two.

Without doubt, Porzio’s treatises contain echoes of Pomponazzi (the Mantuan is even quoted by Agostino Nifo, Porzio’s teacher in Pisa). Porzio and Pomponazzi shared the conviction, stemming from the shared affiliation to Aristotelianism, that exceptional events are not in any way miraculous, and can in any case be explained *in puris naturalibus*, without metaphysical implications, and by sole recourse to explanations that today we would call ‘scientific’. The reasons for the 1538 earthquake that devastated the area of Pozzuoli (subject of the pamphlet *De conflagratione agri Pozzuoli*), were then looked for – as Aristotle stated in the *Meteorologia* (recalled in paraphrase by Porzio) – in the effective causes (the tellurian upheavals produced by the clash of subterranean vapours and fires etc.) and not in inauspicious astral influences. Even the mysterious case narrated in *De puella germanica*, (concerning a girl with little appetite who went without food for fifteen months), could not be solved by recourse to an implausible thesis of “nourishment by air” (though this was admitted by Galen) but, rather, by verifying the excessive amount, frequent in women, of the phlegmatic temperament that favours long fasts.

Though faithful to the Pomponazzi line, which aimed at safeguarding the peripatetic notion of “nature” as the sole source of properties of the sublunar world, Porzio disagrees with the opinion expressed by the author of *De incantationibus* when it comes to recognising the causality of astrology, imagination and magic (also *naturalis*) over terrestrial phenomena (a position that – as one might have expected – provoked the “poisonous” comments by G.B. Della Porta). In the 1545 lectures on book III of *De anima*, Porzio maintains a higher loyalty to the Aristotelian text (which he, unlike Pomponazzi, could read in Greek) and rules out any extraneous influence in natural dynamics, to the point of contemplating, on the basis of a “restrictive” interpretation of the thought of Aristotle, nature as comprising only matter and compounds. This position, a

sign of “repudiation of the abstract supersensible”, negates every assumption that admits the heavenly bodies as the cause of human events (“when Aristotle says that even the sky is a natural body, he confirms it *aequivoce*”). Yet, late in *De rerum naturalium principiis*, Porzio recalls that *nature* be understood as “only the form “*quae est in materia*”, while the superlunar world is famously devoid of vagueness and therefore of materiality” (p. 189).

Even with regard to mortalism (a philosophical reason that comes closer to them?), the two thinkers show significant differences. Yet, even before the writing of *De mente humana* – which was included, because of its support for mortalism, “in the Parma Index of 1580 and the Roman Index of 1590 *donec ad normam regularum corrigatur*” and even “in 1610 [...] publicly burned in the streets of Naples” (p. 23) – a student of Porzio, Pompeo della Barba, associated the conclusions of *De immortalitate animae* with the lectures of the third book of *De anima*, held by Porzio in Pisa. But in hindsight, on the question of the inseparability of the soul from the body, Porzio followed the “exegesis of Aphrodisius”, which affirms that “the soul is not the body, but nor could it be without body: mortalism thus takes on the character of an original philosophical insight that Aristotle had developed and sanctioned and which Alessandro explained” (p. 103).

Fidelity to the interpretative line of Alessandro of Aphrodisias not only distances Porzio from his teacher Nifo (oscillating “between a ‘bold’ attraction to Averroes and an ostentatious syncretic militancy”), but marks the distance between the Neapolitan and Simplicius, Averroes – on the position of the intellect in power –, and Pomponazzi himself. Even when the thesis of the commenter did not persuade him altogether, as in the case of the agent intellect that “alters” the thesis of Aphrodisius with Averroist motifs, Porzio, by attenuating the inconsistencies, strives to safeguard the reasons.

As well as *secundum rationem naturalem*, the *quaestio de aeternitate animi* is addressed by Porzio *secundum fidem*. This approach leads to predictable outcomes. “The Porzian *quaestio* concludes, in the way one obviously expects, demonstrating philosophical mortality and the eternity of the soul; a theological solution that is inevitable because no rigorously speculative science would have the appropriate tools to give an account of an immortal form” (p. 105).

There is nothing surprising here: this is not a conservative position useful for protecting against the potential risks of inquisition, but a constant trait of his thought deriving from the sincere conviction regarding the dual nature of the human subject. Porzio, in each of his investigations – this element is placed in clear relief by del Soldato – seems to tend towards outcomes that never ignore the part of man that is “the eternal and corruptible aspect, that which therefore raises him to heaven and ties him to the world of natural things” (p. 111). Debated

between two poles, man must be aware that “the sensory faculties enable us to live, but inhibit the immortality linked to intellectual happiness”, without, however, giving up the attempt “to equate as much as possible to the gods, without limiting ourselves exclusively to the care of mortal things” (p. 116).

Porzio’s propensity for the spiritual is evident also in the substantial attention he devotes to the strategies that can help the religious to steer clear of the snares of concupiscence (*De celibatu*); or in his “courageous” comment on the *Pater Noster* (*Formae orandi Christianae enarratio*) in 1538, when “the call to prayer which Christ himself had taught men takes on powerful meanings that had developed within a story begun by Savonarola and Pico, when the comment was a bearer of argumentative appeal against formal pharisaical worship, to then become an implicit declaration of pro-Reformation sympathies beginning with Luther and Erasmus, by way of Fregoso, Curione, Stancaro, Brucioli, Morato, Crispoldi and Valdés” (p. 137). Invitations “to a renewed inner religiousness”, the exaltation of grace and the conviction of the “absolute and irreplaceable” contribution of faith “for the salvation of man, the essentially passive recipient of such a gift” (p. 149), are also themes in lectures held by Porzio (on the poetry of Petrarch) at the Florentine Academy; an environment in which he revealed a pronounced interest in “heterodox ferment from a Reformation perspective” (p. 59).

Topics such as the unreasonableness of grace and the hierarchy of a Cosmos rigidly regulated by laws, albeit from different sides, seem to exclude human arbitrariness and, consequently, the moral value of the works inspired by it. In texts such as *De fato*, *De rerum naturalium principiis*, the lost *De arbitrio humano* and, above all, *An homo bonus, vel malus volens fiat*, Porzio ponders “on the inner limits of human autonomy and its ethical and salvational implications”. Once again – observes the author – the philosopher’s belief emerges that the most profound trait of human nature is its duplicity: man is a hybrid being in constant balance between the miseries of the senses and religious impulses. An irreducible ambiguity, threatened by Platonic and Stoic philosophy and which even a rigorous Aristotelianism would end up ruling out.

In an effort to “safeguard the mutual dignity of Aristotelianism and theology”, Porzio, well aware of the “principles of the two paradigms that preside over almost incompatible ontologies and cosmologies” (p. xiii), opts for “a disassociation of ethics and physics”. This courageous option makes credible the value of human initiative, renouncing the “search for an internal and systematic consistency with Aristotelian philosophising, which had however identified – often with dramatic variations – the writings of Pomponazzi” (p. 152). Man’s freedom is guaranteed “by the care overseen by higher bodies, which in fact focus their attention on the conservation of the species without regard for the fate of the

individual" (*cf.* pp. 181–182). God works toward the whole and the individual is liberated from personal fate. However, this autonomous capacity of choice between vice and virtue, far from celebrating the dignity of the human subject, is necessary in the theological perspective of Porzio. "Divine help could be nothing for a man who has already learned to overcome sin; it would be useless to anyone who is able for neither bad nor good if not *per accidens*. The grace granted by Christ needs a man open to vice as well as virtue, in order not to be superfluous or lacking in effect" (p. 169).

*Maurizio Cambi*

Università di Salerno, Italy

*macambi@unisa.it*