

The Uniqueness of Florence's Renaissance Experience

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In his classic work *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Jacob Burckhardt wrote: "The most elevated political thought and the most varied forms of human development are found united in the history of Florence, which . . . deserves the name of the first modern state in the world."^{1*} Burckhardt's view of Florence as the premier city of the Italian Renaissance (to quote him again), "the most important workshop of the Italian, and indeed of the modern European spirit," was not an original perception. That claim had first been made by the Florentines themselves, who extolled the merits of their city, comparing it with Athens, with Rome, with Jerusalem. Florentines never tired of emphasizing the achievements of their fellow-citizens, beginning with Dante and Giotto in the fourteenth century and concluding with such illustrious names as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, Machiavelli and Guicciardini, in the sixteenth. Panegyrics of their native city flowed from the pens of Florentine writers; for example, Leonardo Bruni, the fifteenth-century humanist who in 1428 delivered a funeral oration in honor of a fallen Florentine soldier, Nanni degli Strozzi. Bruni utilized the occasion to present a eulogy of Florence, modeled upon Pericles' speech in praise of Athens, "the school of Hellas," at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. Bruni first described Florence's government as a free republic in which large numbers of citizens participated. The form of this government, he argued, contributed significantly to the high level

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of achievement that the Florentines had attained. "It is marvelous to see," he wrote, "how powerful this access to public office, once it is offered to a free people, proves to be in awakening the talents of the citizens. For where men are given the hope of attaining honor in the state, they take courage and raise themselves to a higher plane. . . . Since such hope and opportunity are held out in our commonwealth, we need not be surprised that talent and industry distinguish themselves in the highest degree."² Bruni was a classical scholar, a humanist, who believed that the revival of ancient learning was exclusively a Florentine achievement: "Who has called this already wholly lost skill of expression back into light, if not our citizens? Who, if not our republic, has brought to recognition, revived and rescued from ruin, Latin learning, which previously had been abject, prostrate and almost dead? . . . Even the knowledge of Greek letters, which for more than 700 years had fallen into disuse in Italy, has been called forth and brought back by our community. . . . Finally, the humanistic studies, surely the best and most excellent of studies, those most appropriate for the human race, needed in private as well as public life . . . such studies took root in Italy after originating in our city."³ Now such eulogistic statements were not uniquely Florentine. Every Italian city of any size and reputation—from the great urban centers like Milan and Venice to small communities like Forlì and Pistoia—had its promoters, its eulogists, who wrote in glowing terms about their city: its growth, its military victories, the strength of its walls, the beauty of its churches and public buildings, the holiness of its saints, the great achievements of its poets and artists, its lawyers and statesmen.⁴ What distinguished the Florentine contributions to this encomiastic literature was its bulk and the reputation of the authors, whose works reached a much larger audience than did those of writers from other cities.

Florentines were keenly aware of the value of their historians in promoting the city's fame and reputation. Vespasiano da Bisticci, the bookseller who wrote a series of biographies of famous fifteenth-century Italians, noted: "Amongst the other exceptional debts which the city of Florence owed to Messer Leonardo [Bruni]

and to Messer Poggio [Bracciolini] may be reckoned the following: from the times of the Roman republic onwards there was not to be found any republic . . . in Italy so famous as was the city of Florence, which had its history written by two authors so illustrious as were Messer Leonardo and Messer Poggio. . . . If the chronicles of the Venetian republic . . . had been written down and not left unrecorded, the renown of Venice would stand higher than it does today. Likewise the affairs of Galeazzo Maria and Filippo Maria [Visconti] . . . would be better known than they are." And Vespasiano concluded his statement with this comment: "Every republic ought to set high value upon its writers."⁵

From this massive literature in praise of Florence and Florentines, there emerge several distinctive themes: the special nature of the city's achievement, her reputation, her superiority over other Italian cities. There was, first, the esthetic dimension, the physical beauty of the city and the surrounding countryside: the churches, palaces, squares, streets, villas. A second theme concerns the great wealth amassed by Florentine merchants, bankers, and industrialists in their business activities that had taken them to the four corners of the known world—from Scandinavia to central Asia—and had inspired the comment by Pope Boniface VIII that "the Florentines are truly the fifth element of the universe." Burckhardt noted this Florentine penchant for statistics, for measuring the city's wealth and her economic vitality in numerical terms. Giovanni Villani devoted three chapters of his fourteenth-century chronicle to a statistical survey of the city, with data on population, food consumption, the production of woolen cloth, the income and expenditures of the commune, even a rare and illuminating reference to the number of students who were enrolled in the city's schools. The political achievements of the Florentines also figure prominently in the civic eulogies dedicated to the city. Leonardo Bruni's praise of the republic has already been mentioned. Not only did Florence share, with Venice, the distinction of preserving her liberty and her republican form of government longer than other Italian city-states, but her citizens contended that, by her efforts alone, republicanism in Italy survived

as a viable political force in the Renaissance, in contrast to the despotisms, the tyrannies, that had replaced popular regimes in other cities.⁶

It is in the cultural realm, in literature and the arts, that the Florentine achievement has been most highly valued by her own citizens and by later generations of Italians and foreigners who have made the pilgrimage to the Arno city, to her libraries and archives and, above all, to her churches, palaces, and museums, to gaze in admiration at the works of her great artists. With his *Divine Comedy*, Dante, the exiled Florentine poet, literally created a vernacular language for Italy, making his native Tuscan the model for the whole peninsula. Giovanni Villani made note of the poet's death with this statement: "On account of the virtues and the learning and the valor of this citizen, it is appropriate to commemorate him in our chronicle, for all of his noble works that he has left . . . have contributed to the glory and the reputation of our city."⁷ When Dante died in 1321, his most illustrious literary successors, Petrarch and Boccaccio, were still boys in their teens; their contributions to Italian literature would not be made until decades later, in the second half of the century. In addition to their contributions to the development of Tuscan as a literary language, both Petrarch and Boccaccio were classical scholars; their enthusiasm for the learning of antiquity stimulated the revival of the *studia humanitatis* that Bruni had described in his funeral oration for Nanni degli Strozzi. Throughout the fifteenth century, the Greek and Latin classics were the preeminent concern of young Florentine intellectuals, not only professional scholars like Bruni and Coluccio Salutati, but also amateurs like Cosimo de' Medici and his brother Lorenzo, who studied classical literature with Roberto de' Rossi, former pupil of Manuel Chrysoloras, the Greek scholar from Constantinople. Classical literature became, during the fifteenth century, the standard educational fare of young Florentine aristocrats so that, by the end of the century, it was normal for the lawyer Bernardo Machiavelli to send his young son Niccolò (as he reported in his diary) "to Maestro Matteo, a teacher of grammar, to learn to read Donatus," the basic textbook for the study of Latin.⁸ If literature, both classical and vernacular, figured very

prominently in the Florentine claim to cultural distinction, the achievements of her painters, sculptors, goldsmiths, and architects were the most important element in Florence's coronation as queen of the Renaissance. It is the overwhelming visual impact of this artistic heritage that has made such a powerful impression upon the imagination and sensibilities of generations of Europeans. In the eighteenth century, Florence was an obligatory stop on the Grand Tour of young English aristocrats and, later, of their German and Swiss counterparts. In the twentieth century, with the emergence of mass tourism, it is Florence together with Rome that attracts the greatest number of visitors; it is to the churches and museums that they go to catch a glimpse of Ghiberti's *Doors of Paradise*, of Donatello's sculptures in the Bargello and the Museo del Opera dell'Duomo, of Botticelli's *Primavera* and *Birth of Venus* in the Uffizi, and of Michelangelo's *David* in the Accademia.

Florentines were not the most objective analysts of their city and its historical achievement, but neither were their fellow Italians who had their own strong attachments to their native towns and who, particularly if they lived close to Florence, often nourished an intense hatred for their neighbors. Perhaps the most unbiased observers were foreigners from across the Alps, but the evidence from ultramontane visitors is very scanty before 1500. There was general agreement, among Italians and foreigners alike, that Florence was one of the most beautiful cities in Italy and, indeed, in Europe. The Venetian ambassador, Marco Foscarini, wrote in 1527: "For an inland city, I do not believe that there exists in Italy, or indeed in the whole of Europe, a more pleasant and delightful region than that in which Florence is located. It is situated in a plain completely surrounded by hills and mountains. . . . These hills are all fertile, well cultivated, and covered with the most beautiful and sumptuous palaces, built at great expense and furnished with all of the delights that can be imagined: gardens, groves, fountains, ponds, baths. . . . Through the heart of the city, passes the Arno, an admirable river, spanned by four bridges. The city has very straight and elegant streets, all paved, so that it is always clean and beautiful."⁹ A century later (in 1600) a French visitor, the prince de Rohan, waxed lyrical in his praise of the city:

"Florence has spread the concept of beauty throughout Italy. . . . It is now at the height of its glory: filled with beautiful squares, beautiful streets, beautiful palaces, beautiful hospitals and beautiful churches; more than any other city in Italy. These features, combined with the freedom that exists here for all types of people, and the creative activities of the inhabitants, have persuaded me to stay here longer than anywhere else."¹⁰

If the consensus of opinion about the physical city was unanimously favorable, the judgment of the Florentines as a people was just as consistently negative. They were sometimes admired, they were often feared, but they were never loved. They were accused of every vice known to their contemporaries: their greed and avarice, their inconstancy and faithlessness, their pride and arrogance, their peculiar sexual proclivities. Our Venetian witness, Marco Foscarelli, described them in these terms: "They are weak men by nature and by circumstance; by nature, because their air and sky naturally produce timid men, and by circumstances, because they all engage in commerce and in manual and mechanical occupations, working with their hands in the lowliest activities. The chief men who govern the state go to their silk-manufacturing shops and throwing their cloaks over their shoulders, they squat on their haunches and work in public for all to see. Their sons stay in the shops with their aprons, and they carry sacks full of silk to the masters and do the other tasks of the shop."¹¹ Factional discord was said to be endemic among the Florentines, as even their own citizens acknowledged. Dante accused them of that disease in the *Divine Comedy*, as did a host of Florentine chroniclers: Dino Compagni, Giovanni and Matteo Villani, Marchionne Stefani. The Florentines saw themselves, in their business and diplomatic relations, as honorable and trustworthy, as never violating their contracts or treaties, but their neighbors viewed them in a different light. Here is a not untypical comment by a citizen of Lucca in the year 1388. He had been sent by his government to Siena, whose inhabitants, he reported, lived in fear of Florentine aggression: "They can recognize the trot of the wolf," he wrote and then warned his own government to be on guard against Florentine treachery: "Everywhere they probe with their heads and their vul-

pine tails. . . . I beg you to guard your fortresses well, because the accursed Judas, full of evil and avarice, never sleeps!"¹²

Not loved, then, but feared and resented by other Italians; sometimes respected for their wealth and the military power that wealth could buy; sometimes admired for their tenacity and determination in fighting wars. One particularly heroic moment in Florentine military history was the year 1402, when the city was surrounded by the troops of the duke of Milan. The Florentines refused to surrender to their more powerful enemy, who (fortunately for them) died of a fever in the autumn of that year, whereupon his leaderless army melted away and Florence was saved. The Florentines were frequently beaten in battle: by the Sienese at Montaperti in 1266, by the Lucchese at Altopascio in 1326, and by the Milanese in a series of disastrous defeats in the Romagna in the late 1420s. But they rarely lost their wars, which usually ended in a military stalemate and a negotiated peace. The city was not occupied by enemy troops from the beginnings of communal government in the twelfth century until 1530, and only on rare occasions did hostile forces penetrate her frontier defenses to ravage the villages and farms in her dominion. The Florentines were thus remarkably successful in defending themselves against their enemies and, thus, in preserving their liberty.

No one could deny the strong Florentine commitment to self-government, to *libertà*, but critics could and did point out that Florentine liberty has to be understood in a very restricted sense. Despite the claims of Leonardo Bruni that Florence was governed by a substantial part of her citizens, political rights were enjoyed only by a small minority that was recruited for the most part from the wealthiest and most prominent families: the Strozzi, the Capponi, the Albizzi, and the Medici among others. Though a few artisans and petty shopkeepers filled civic offices, most were excluded from politics. This severe limitation on political participation has persuaded some modern historians that Florentine republicanism was essentially a sham and that power in the city was limited to such a small number that, in its essential features, the so-called republic was scarcely distinguishable from the despotisms of Milan or Ferrara.¹³ This argument assumes even greater

weight after the Medici become the leaders of the Florentine state in 1434. But if only a few Florentines possessed political rights, they were more fortunate than the citizens of the subject towns—Pisa, Pistoia, Arezzo, Volterra, San Gimignano—who were governed by magistrates sent from Florence and who paid heavily, in taxes and in humiliation, for the privilege of being ruled by others. Pisa was conquered by a Florentine army in 1406, but the Pisans were never reconciled to Florentine rule. In 1494 they recovered their freedom, and for fifteen years, they fought desperately to preserve their liberty before finally succumbing to the superior forces of the Florentines. For the Pisans, and for other Tuscans who lived under their domination, the Florentines were conquerors, tyrants, exploiters, not lovers of freedom.

Florentine liberty was thus for the privileged few: freedom from the rule of foreigners for the residents of the city itself, and freedom to participate actively in political life for only a minority of those residents. Yet, with all of these restrictions and limitations, I would argue that the Florentine political experience was unique in Italy and that it was very significant historically. The Arno republic was not the most stable nor the most durable in Italy; that distinction belonged rather to Venice. But like Venice, Florence provided its citizens (and not just a handful but rather hundreds) with the opportunity to gain a political education, to listen to and participate in the lengthy deliberations over problems confronting the state—problems of war and peace, finance and justice—and to be involved in the administration of public affairs, as magistrates in the dominion, as officials in charge of the grain supply, and as members of the supreme executive, the Signoria. No other Italian city, not even Venice, has left so full and rich a record of political deliberation over so long a period of time, from the age of Dante in the early fourteenth century to the age of Savonarola and Machiavelli at the end of the fifteenth. No other city explored so systematically and deeply the basic problems of government: how to create and maintain institutions that will preserve liberty; how to foster a strong civic spirit; how to persuade citizens to make sacrifices for the good of the whole community.¹⁴ It is no accident that the most creative and original political

thinker of the Renaissance, Niccolò Machiavelli, was a Florentine and that his ideas were shaped by his experiences as an official of the republic between 1498 and 1512.

The magnitude of Florence's political achievement was not recognized by Italian or European opinion, which tended to emphasize the negative rather than the positive aspects of that experience. Her Tuscan neighbors lived in fear of being conquered or in rage because they had been conquered. Her rivals in other Italian states—Milan, Naples, Venice—were hostile because their political interests often clashed with Florence's. Foreigners from across the Alps were generally contemptuous of this small republic that was too weak to defend itself without allies. When, for example, Machiavelli visited the French court as an ambassador in the early 1500s to appeal for help from King Louis XII to assist Florence in recovering Pisa, he noted bitterly that he was not treated with respect by officials at the French court who viewed him as a kind of poor cousin, whose government needed the king more than he needed it. Machiavelli did get his revenge, in a sense, by writing, in the *Prince*, a devastating critique of French policy in Italy after the first invasion by King Charles VIII in 1494. He showed clearly how the stupidity of that policy led ultimately to the expulsion of the French from the peninsula.¹⁵ But even though he created, in the *Prince*, an enduring image of King Louis XII as an inept fool, he was not able to change French policy or French attitudes toward Florence.

In contrast to contemporary judgments on Florence as a political community, there was general agreement among Italians that the city was the leading center of culture in the peninsula. Not until around 1500, when Rome emerged as the intellectual and artistic capital of Italy, was Florence's primacy challenged; and in the sixteenth century, other cities, like Ferrara and Venice, were competing successfully with the Arno city for this position. Pope Pius II, a native of Siena who was certainly no friend of Florence, wrote this evaluation of the city's intellectual achievement around the year 1460:

In former ages there have been many illustrious Florentines whose names are known even today, but most illustrious of all was Dante Alighieri, whose great poem with its noble description of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory breathes a wisdom almost divine. . . . Next to him was Francesco Petrarca, whose equal would be hard to find. . . . The third place I should not go wrong in assigning to Giovanni Boccaccio, though he was a little more frivolous and his style was not highly polished. After him comes Coluccio [Salutati], whose prose and verse suited his own age but seem rough to ours. He was Chancellor of Florence, and Galeazzo, duke of Milan, used to say that Coluccio's pen did him more harm than thirty troops of . . . cavalry. . . . He was succeeded in office by Leonardo [Bruni], who was born in Arezzo but had been made a Florentine citizen. He was deeply versed in Greek and Latin and his eloquence was almost Ciceronian. . . . A great many more men might be mentioned by whose abilities the power and prestige of Florence have been increased.¹⁶

Pope Pius has nothing to say about Florence's achievement in the plastic arts, except to describe the beauty of her churches and palaces. Pius was a humanist, who regarded painters and sculptors as craftsmen—like carpenters and stone masons—and not as creative geniuses whose skills could be compared to those of poets and scholars. There are some scattered hints in the sources of Florentine awareness of the exceptional talents of her artists; for example, in the eulogy given to the architect Arnolfo di Cambio in the year 1300 that is embedded in the legislation granting him a tax exemption. Arnolfo was described as "the most renowned and the most expert in church construction of any other in these parts and . . . through his industry, experience and genius, the Florentine commune . . . hopes to have the most beautiful and the most honorable cathedral in Tuscany."¹⁷

The painter Giotto was universally recognized by contemporaries as Florence's (and indeed, Italy's) greatest artist of the fourteenth century. His distinction was recognized early by Dante in the *Divine Comedy*:

credette Cimabue nella pittura
tener lo campo, ed ora ha Giotto il grido,
si ché la fama di colui è oscura.

(In painting Cimabue was thought to hold the field and now Giotto has the cry so that the other's fame is down.)¹⁸

When Giotto was appointed to the position of governor of the building works of the Florentine commune in the 1330s, he received this official accolade from his employers: "It is said that in the whole world no one can be found who is more capable in these and other things than Master Giotto di Bondone, painter of Florence. He should be received therefore in his country as a great master and held dear in the city, and he should have cause for agreeing to a continued domicile within it. With this many will profit from his knowledge and learning so that no little beauty will come to the city."¹⁹ A generation later, Boccaccio wrote about Giotto in *The Decameron*: "He had a mind of such excellence that there was nothing given by Nature . . . which he, with style or pen or brush, could not paint so like, that it seemed not so much similar but rather the thing itself. . . . It is therefore with justice that he may be called one of the lights of Florentine glory."²⁰

Toward the end of the century, the *novellista* Franco Sacchetti asked rhetorically: "Who was the greatest painter that we have had, who other than Giotto?" And that judgment was shared by an outsider, Benvenuto da Imola, who wrote in his commentary on the *Divine Comedy* (the year was 1376): "Giotto still holds the field because no one subtler than he has yet appeared."²¹ In addition to artists and professional writers, Giotto's work was known to Florentines who could admire his frescoes, for example, his cycle of paintings of the life of St. Francis in Santa Croce. A merchant named Giovanni Morelli, writing in his diary about 1400, had this instructive observation to make, when describing his sister Mea's hands. They were, he said, "so beautiful that they appeared to have been painted by Giotto."²²

The fifteenth century, the Quattrocento, was Florence's great age of the arts, when the giants appeared and when each decade brought forth a new surge of artistic creativity. It was in that century that Florence's reputation as an artistic center spread

throughout the peninsula and to other parts of Europe. In his fine book, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, Michael Baxandall cites a poem from the Umbrian artist Giovanni Santi, father of Raphael, who wrote that "so many [painters] have been famous in our century, they make any other age seem poor." Giovanni named some twenty-five Italian painters as worthy of distinction, of whom thirteen were Florentine: Fra Angelico, Fra Filippo Lippi, Domenico Veneziano, Masaccio, Andrea del Castagno, Paolo Uccello, Antonio and Piero Pollaiuolo, Leonardo da Vinci, Ghirlandajo, Filippino Lippi, Sandro Botticelli. Giovanni did not bother to mention those Florentine artists who excelled in other fields: Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, Donatello, Leon Battista Alberti, Michelozzo, to name only the most renowned.²³

Florentine artistic achievement reached its apotheosis in the work of Michelangelo Buonarroti, who was universally regarded by Italian contemporaries as the ultimate master in painting, sculpture, and architecture. Michelangelo's contemporary, Giorgio Vasari, expressed that view in the preface to his biography of Michelangelo:

While the best and most industrious artists were laboring, by the light of Giotto and his followers, to give the world examples of such power as the benignity of their stars and the varied character of their fantasies enabled them to command, and while desirous of imitating the perfection of nature by the excellence of art, they were struggling to attain that high comprehension which many call intelligence, and were universally laboring, for the most part in vain, the ruler of heaven was pleased to turn the eyes of his clemency toward earth, and perceiving the fruitlessness of so many labors, the ardent studies pursued without any result, and the presumptuous self-sufficiency of men, which is farther from truth than darkness from light, he resolved . . . to send to the world a spirit endowed with universality of power in each art, and in every profession, one capable of showing by himself alone what is the perfection of art in the sketch, the outline, the shadows, or the lights, one who could give relief to painting, and with an upright judgment could operate as perfectly in sculpture, nay, who was so highly accomplished in architecture also, that he was able to render our habitations secure and commodious, healthy and cheerful, well proportioned, and enriched with the varied ornaments of art. . . .

And as the supreme ruler perceived that in the execution of all these sublime arts, the Tuscan genius has ever been raised high above all others, the men of that region displaying more zeal in study, and more constancy in labor than any other people in Italy, so did he resolve to confer the privilege of his birth on Florence, as worthy above all other cities to be his homeland, and as justly meriting that the perfections of every art should be exhibited to the world by means of who should be her citizen.²⁴

Vasari offers us a variety of explanations for Florence's artistic supremacy. In the passage that I have quoted, he suggests that divine favor was responsible for the gift of Michelangelo to Florence, as an indication of his satisfaction with the achievements of the Florentines (and, more generally, the Tuscans) in the arts. But as the historian of that record of creative achievement that he himself defined as a *rinascità* or "renaissance," Vasari was keenly aware of the value of a tradition of artistic excellence, of standards set by earlier generations of artists, and of standards surpassed by their successors. In his biography of Masaccio, he wrote that the most celebrated painters and sculptors in Florence had all gone on a pilgrimage to the Brancacci chapel to study Masaccio's cycle of frescoes there: "All who have endeavored to learn the art have always gone for instruction to this chapel to grasp the precepts and rules of Masaccio for the proper representation of figures." In another passage in his history, Vasari developed a sociological explanation for Florence's supremacy. That was due, he said, to the fact that "many people were extremely critical, because the air was conducive to freedom of thought and that men were not satisfied with mediocre works . . . [and] that it was necessary to be industrious in order to live, which meant using one's wits and judgment all the time. . . . For Florence did not have a large and fertile countryside, so that men could not live cheaply there. . . . Thirdly was the greed for honor and glory which that air generates in men of every occupation."²⁵

How much of this argument can we accept today? Certainly not Vasari's ultimate explanations: divine favor, the quality of the Florentine air, the poverty of the region; but we can use Vasari's descriptive statement as a basis for further analysis: his emphasis

on the intense competitiveness that characterized the life of this city and his comment on the Florentine commitment to excellence. If these characteristics were so highly developed in this city, they would certainly help to explain why this community was so creative. The key question is: Was the *quality* of life in Florence significantly different from that in other Italian cities during the Renaissance centuries? If so, did these differences stimulate Florentine achievement in the arts, in literature, in culture?

Let us begin with the most basic dimension of that experience, the economic. Florence was one of a small cluster of very large (by contemporary standards) Italian cities, rich enough to sustain its independence, and rich enough to subsidize a flourishing culture. The Arno city was not the largest or the wealthiest city in Italy: Milan, Venice, Genoa, and Naples were all bigger and richer. What distinguished Florence's economic structure from these other cities was its complex and diversified character. Florence was a center of commerce, industry, and banking; it was the hub of a regional market and of a multitude of highly specialized crafts. Nowhere in Europe was entrepreneurial activity more varied, nowhere was the entrepreneurial spirit more highly developed. The qualities of mind and habit fostered by this atmosphere were: a familiarity with numbers, with measurement; a very sophisticated knowledge of how credit mechanisms could be exploited to make money; an ability to evaluate business opportunities; and a generally pragmatic approach to human problems.²⁶

It is in the area of social structure and organization that Florence's distinctiveness becomes more striking. I would argue for the proposition that Florentine society in the Renaissance was the most flexible, the most "open," the most pluralistic of any major Italian city in this period. Florence did have a social hierarchy: an upper stratum of wealthy, prominent, influential families; a middle stratum of petty bourgeoisie, retail merchants, shopkeepers, artisans, craftsmen; and a lower stratum of propertyless laborers, servants, guards, vagrants, criminals. To move up the rungs of this social hierarchy was not easy; it was much more difficult than it has been in modern American society, but it was easier in Florence than it was in Venice or Milan or Genoa or Naples. Florence's

aristocracy, its ruling elite, was constantly being replenished by new blood from outside and below. Unlike some other Italian cities, Florence did not have a titled nobility with special legal or political privileges before the end of the sixteenth century. Status in Florence did depend in part upon birth, upon being born into a prominent family, but it did not depend solely upon that accident. Other factors such as wealth and personal achievement were involved. Thus, a man like Leonardo Bruni—a poor, unknown, obscure emigré from Arezzo, the son of a grain dealer—could become the chancellor of the Florentine republic, could become one of her wealthiest citizens, and could marry his son to the daughter of the illustrious Castellani family.

The looseness and flexibility of Florentine society is reflected in another context, that of social relationships. This society was "deferential"; those at the top of the hierarchy were treated with respect by their social inferiors, but members from the various social categories did mix with each other. Aristocrats did not keep aloof from the rest of society or isolate themselves in their palaces and villas. Florence was not a socially segregated city with the rich living in one quarter and the poor in their ghettos. Instead, rich, middling, and poor lived together cheek by jowl in the same neighborhood, and within those neighborhoods, social relationships bridged social gaps. Cosimo de' Medici, the founder of his family's political fortune, would have known most if not all of the residents of his neighborhood near the church of San Lorenzo. He had business dealings with the local merchants and artisans; he would sit with them on municipal boards and commissions; he would be godfather to their children. They would address him familiarly by his first name. While recognizing his political power and influence, they would also gain comfort from the fact that they could regard him as their friend, benefactor, protector.²⁷

This egalitarian dimension of Florentine social life was reinforced, to some degree, by the political system, which encouraged contact among the various social groups in the city. In the republic's supreme executive, the Signoria, there were always two artisans and shopkeepers, men who worked with their hands and in their shops, among the nine priors who held office for two-month

periods and bore the responsibility for the governance of the state. Florentine politics were deliberative, consultative; decisions were taken only after protracted debate in which representatives of every social category above the very lowest took part. The records of deliberations concerning the building of the cathedral in the fourteenth century reveal a broad cross-section of Florentine society: knights, lawyers, physicians, merchants, cloth manufacturers, clerics, goldsmiths, sculptors, carpenters, stone masons—all of whom expressed their views openly and candidly on the architectural and decorative problems of this enterprise.²⁸ There has survived, from the year 1504, a similar record of consultation concerning the location of Michelangelo's giant statue of David, which had just been completed. A group of some twenty Florentines expressed their opinions on the appropriate setting for the statue. Among the consultants were experts—the painters Leonardo da Vinci and Pietro Perugino; the architect Giuliano da San Gallo—but there were also obscure men such as the fife-player Giovanni Cellini (the father of the goldsmith Benvenuto), the embroiderer Gallieno, a jeweler named Salvestro, a goldsmith named Riccio, a wood carver named Bernardo della Cecca. These men were quite willing, indeed eager, to speak out in the company of famous artists and to a group of prominent citizens, the consuls of the cloth manufacturers' guild, who had convened them to deliberate on this problem.²⁹

This involvement of citizens from a broad range of the society in cultural matters was a very significant feature of Florentine experience. Civic patronage of culture, both literary and artistic, was not, of course, a uniquely Florentine phenomenon. The physical character of every Italian city was formed, shaped, by civic concerns, by the community's desire to beautify itself, to create the most attractive *ambiente* possible. These impulses were no stronger in Florence than elsewhere; but, except for a few towns, most notably Venice, they were more distinctly civic and republican than in Milan or Ferrara, where the rule of the *signore*, the despot, created a very different type of cultural patronage.³⁰ The difference between the cultural achievements of Florence and Genoa has often been noted. Genoa was, during the Renaissance, a cul-

tural desert; its artistic and literary achievements were third-rate at best. Genoa's failure to create a dynamic culture may be explained in part by the weakness of her communal institutions. Medieval and Renaissance Genoa was dominated by great aristocratic families—the Doria, the Spinola, the Fieschi—and these potent clans inhibited the development of a vital civic culture comparable to that of Florence.³¹

To summarize the strands of my argument about Florentine creativity, I have suggested that it was the result of a felicitous combination of historical developments and circumstances, some of which were shared by other Italian cities, but some of which were unique to this city. Florentines had created an *ambiente*, a milieu, in which a man worked hard to excel in his discipline or trade or profession and in which that excellence was recognized and rewarded. Among the ingredients that contributed to this milieu were a productive economy, a pluralistic and flexible social order, a political system that was tailored to the needs and aspirations of that society, and above all, a tradition, a history, of great achievement.³²

Living in that environment contributed to what may be called the fashioning of a distinctive Florentine personality, the features of which can be perceived in the private records, specifically, in the memoirs and diaries, the *ricordi*, and the correspondence of individual Florentines. It is no accident that there is much more extant information on the private lives of Florentines, from their own hands, than for any other community in Italy or, indeed, in Europe. Florentines apparently were more accustomed to keeping a written record of their experiences than were their contemporaries elsewhere.³³ Petrarch was the first Italian, the first European, to preserve a detailed record of his inner life. His example was followed by humanists Coluccio Salutati, Leonard Bruni, Poggio Bracciolini, Marsilio Ficino, each an avid letter writer who often preserved his correspondence as one way of ensuring that fame would survive his demise. Unfortunately, the Florentine artists of the fifteenth century have left a much skimpier record of their personal and professional experiences. They made their statements with their brushes and chisels and not with their pens.

Most of our knowledge of these men comes from a not always reliable sixteenth-century authority, Giorgio Vasari, and from fragmentary documents concerning commissions or payments for work completed. It is very difficult to learn much about the inner life of the Sienese painter Simone Martini from reading that, in the year 1327, he received 30 lire from the Sienese government for painting 720 gold double lilies at 10 denarii a double lily.³⁴ We know much more about Florentine businessmen, whose mercantile correspondence frequently contains clues to their private personae. There has survived, too, in the Florentine archives, a rich and largely unexplored collection of private materials written by ordinary Florentine men and women whose personalities are revealed occasionally in remarkably rich detail.³⁵

My favorite fifteenth-century Florentine is Giovanni Morelli, 1371–1444. He lived near the Franciscan church of Santa Croce and left a diary, a memoir which, in its openness and candor, its revelation of self, has few parallels in the history of European autobiography before the nineteenth century. The key to Morelli's life was the death of his father when Morelli was only three years old. Though his mother survived her husband, she remarried and he felt abandoned by her. The strongest attachment of his youth was to his sister Mea, who gave him some of the emotional sustenance that he did not receive from his parents, but Mea died early, in childbirth, and young Giovanni had to make his own way in the "world. His life seemed to be a series of misfortunes that, in their number and magnitude, remind one of Job in the Old Testament. He fell in love with a Florentine girl from his neighborhood, but her father refused to sanction the marriage. So he married not for love but for social and economic reasons, and his emotional needs remained unfulfilled. He was very happy when a son Alberto was born to him, but that joy turned to intense grief when the boy died at the tender age of nine. In a passage that is almost unbearably painful to read, Morelli describes his feelings of loss and his efforts to recover from his grief. On the first anniversary of the boy's death, Giovanni prays to the Virgin and the saints for solace. After falling asleep, he has a dream in which he sees his dead son who is accompanied by St. Catherine. The boy says that he is in

paradise and that his father should not grieve for him nor blame himself for mistreating him. Upon waking, Morelli feels intense relief and his grief subsides. One feels emotionally drained after reading this segment of Morelli's diary, for he has taken us with him on a journey into his psyche.³⁶

It cannot be argued that Morelli was unique in his capacity to feel deeply and intensely, but I do suggest that his diary is evidence of a general Florentine trait that is not found commonly elsewhere: to express openly his emotions, his likes and dislikes, his loves and hates, his passions and prejudices. In this realm of inner experience, the Florentines made a distinctive statement, just as they did in their economic and social relations—in their politics, their piety, their poetry, their painting, and their architecture.

NOTES

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3. *Ibid.*, pp. 416–17.
4. Daniel Waley, *The Italian City-Republics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), pp. 139–63.
5. *The Vespasiano Memoirs*, translated by William George and Emily Waters (London: Routledge, 1926), pp. 356–57.
6. Baron, *Crisis*, chapters 2, 16; Daniel M. Bueno de Mesquita, "Despotism in Italian Politics," in John Hale, John Highfield and Beryl Smalley, editors, *Europe in the Late Middle Ages* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), pp. 304–13, 330. For pertinent texts in translation, see Renée Neu Watkins, editor, *Humanism and Liberty: Writings on Freedom from Fifteenth-Century Florence* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1978).
7. *Cronica di Giovanni Villani*, edited by F. Dragomanni (Florence: S. Coen, 1844–45), book IX, chapter 136.
8. Bernardo Machiavelli, *Libro di ricordi*, edited by C. Olschki (Florence: Le Monnier, 1954), p. 31.
9. *Relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti al Senato*, edited by E. Alberi, 2nd series, 1:9; translated in Gene Brucker, *Renaissance Italy* (New York: Rinehart, 1958), p. 22.
10. Henri de Rohan, *Voyage du duc de Rohan fait en l'an 1600 en Italie, Allemagne, Pays-Bas Unis, Angleterre, et Escosse* (Amsterdam: Elzevier, 1646), p. 131.

11. *Relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti*, translated in Brucker, *Renaissance Italy*, p. 22.
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13. Philip Jones, "Communes and Despots: The City State in Late-Medieval Italy," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 15 (1965): 71-95.
14. For a recent appraisal, John Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).
15. *The Prince*, chapter 3. For Machiavelli's reports on the French attitude toward Florence, see John R. Hale, *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), pp. 53-57.
16. *Memoirs of a Renaissance Pope: The Commentaries of Pius II*, translated by Florence Gragg, edited by Leona C. Gabel (New York: Putnam, 1959), p. 109.
17. Gene Brucker, *Renaissance Florence* (New York: Wiley, 1969), p. 225.
18. John Larner, *Culture and Society in Italy 1290-1420* (London: Batsford, 1971), pp. 270-71.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 275.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 276.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 277.
22. *Libro di ricordi*, edited by V. Branca (Florence: Le Monnier, 1956), p. 178.
23. *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 111-14.
24. *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, translated by Mrs. Jonathan Foster (London, 1855-64), 5: 227-29.
25. Vasari's life of Perugino, cited in Peter Burke, *Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy 1420-1540* (London: Batsford, 1972), p. 4.
26. I have discussed this problem in *Renaissance Florence*, chapter 2. On the mentality of the Florentine merchant, see Christian Bec, *Les marchands écrivains à Florence, 1375-1434* (Paris, La Haye: Mouton, 1967).
27. On the bonds linking Florentines together, see Dale Kent, *The Rise of the Medici* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), part I.
28. Gene Brucker, *Florentine Politics and Society, 1343-1378* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 77.
29. Robert Klein and Henri Zerner, *Italian Art, 1500-1600* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1966), pp. 39-44).
30. Larner, *Culture and Society*, chapters 4, 5.
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32. Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, pp. 213-30.

33. *Two Memoirs of Renaissance Florence: The Diaries of Buonaccorso Pitti and Gregorio Dati*, translated by Julia Martines, edited by Gene Brucker (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 9-18; Richard Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), chapter 1; Francis W. Kent, *Household and Lineage in Renaissance Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).
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35. For the personalities of Florentine women, see Iris Origo, *The Merchant of Prato* (London: J. Cape, 1957), part II, chapters 1, 2; Lauro Martines, "A Way of Looking at Women in Renaissance Florence," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1974): 15-28; Gene Brucker, editor, *The Society of Renaissance Florence* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 179-83, 190-201, 206-12, 218-28, 260-61, 270-73.
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