THREE FLORENTINES OF THE RENAISSANCE

Marsilio Ficino—Savonarola—Machiavelli

MARSILIO FICINO was the greatest of the fifteenth century Platonists. His love for Plato was at least equal to his erudition. His influence both as an individual and as head of the Platonic Academy of Florence, extended over the whole of Europe. In an early period of his life he was a humanist and a philosopher of more or less pagan tendency. In maturity of thought and years, he was deeply conscious of the Christian values that many of the learned were too ready to overlook. His ideal was the conciliation of Platonism and Christianity, pagan classicism and Christian thought, the ethics of antiquity and Catholic morals. He was fascinated by St. Augustine, but it seemed to him that the Augustinian synthesis could not appeal to the world of his time. The problems of nature, of ethics, of history were set in other terms. What he sought was to christianize Plato and to platonize the Gospel. This two-fold tendency is to be found in the *Theologia platonica,* in which he saw a new *Summa Theologica,* under the aegis of Plato instead of that of Aristotle.

Three elements in the work of Marsilio Ficino render it representative of the period—the sovereignty or autonomy of philosophy as the instrument of reason, as against the criterion that made of it the handmaid of theology; secondly, a concrete realism in respect of the object of knowledge, in nature and history, as against the universalizing abstractionism of the Schools; thirdly, a natural animism, the result of the principle of Third Essences, and which formed the substructure of the astrology of the time, as against the Aristotelian conception of Forms.

The tendency towards the concrete real and towards philosophic mysticism was no novelty. Cardinal di Cusa had inaugurated modern philosophy by his *Docta Ignorantia* and his *Visio Dei*. His immanent principle resolved itself into divine transcendency. His all but infinite world lost

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itself in a truly infinite God. Ficino took a further step in the direction of modern thought by affirming the autonomy of philosophy. He did not favour a separation of philosophy from theology, nor would he repudiate theology, but sought to reconcile the two in the name of reason. Dogmas, miracles, grace, supernatural life, Ficino subjected them all to a rational elaboration different from that of Thomism, and, though in matters of faith he remained within the bounds of orthodoxy, he sought to elucidate them in the light of a broad Platonism which for him had become principle of truth.

All this would have only a mediocre interest if it did not reveal a fundamental tendency in the Renaissance—that of reconciling Christianity with classical paganism, as religious and moral thought, as culture, as art, as politics, as the substance of social life. At best, the two elements, Christianity and paganism, were considered if not of equal standing, at least of equal force and equal attraction; the synthesis of the two was sought in a harmony that admitted of neither the subordination nor denial of one or the other. The attempt was bound to fail, and gave rise to a vast crisis, but the conscious or unconscious reality of the Renaissance lay in this effort to reconcile a radical dualism which in its precise terms could admit of no such reconciliation.

This irreconciliability was revealed by GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA to Florence, to Italy, and to the cultured European world. The Florentine political background of Savonarola's action is almost identical with Dante's, but the ethical and mystical import of events brought to light the incompatibility that was so deeply felt by the Dominican friar. Whereas Dante was able to achieve a synthesis of the world and the other world, of nature and grace, of philosophy and theology, Savonarola could not do so. The Renaissance stood in his way.

Savonarola attacked the corruption of manners, and in this he was not alone. Other holy men and women, such as the great St. Francis di Paola, his contemporary, fought the same fight with more or less success. Savonarola sought the reform of the Church; the word resounded throughout Italy,

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as in France and Germany, England and Spain, and all over Europe; zealous men, laymen and clerics, were convinced of its necessity and urgency. Their voice found no echo among the higher clergy and in the courts of the princes. Faced with the simoniacal election of Pope Alexander VI, with his immoral behaviour and the corruption of Rome, Savonarola called for a Church Council and worked for its convocation, but his action was not sufficient to create such a state of mind in Christendom as little more than half a century before had lead to Pisa, to Constance and to Bâle. The effort made in these councils to re-establish the Church on a sound basis had been at once exhausting and disturbing. Now each country in so far as possible took its own measures. Particularism was developing more and more, at the expense of universalism. The Papacy itself was increasingly losing stature, involved as it was in the quarrels of the Italian States. The central government of the Church was becoming ever more bureaucratic, formal and fiscal. It was a moment when the urge to great aspirations was wanting.

With a disintegrating ecclesiastical world on the one hand and a mundane and paganizing world on the other, the figure of Savonarola rises as that of an ascetic and prophet. In the full tide of the Renaissance he revives the apocalyptic spirit of the past, framing it in thomist philosophy and Catholic orthodoxy. If he set a Council above the Pope and believed such a Council could be summoned by the King of France in agreement with the Cardinals and Bishops who were not subservient to Alexander VI, he was in no way departing from the normal line of thought of Catholics of his time. Such a theory was then legitimate, and was for long taught in nearly the whole of Europe. The name of Gerson was revered as that of a Saint. Pius II in condemning the appeal to the future Council against Papal decisions had not ended the question nor had he annulled the decisions of Constance. Moreover, Savonarola took his stand on a point then universally granted, and which was later confirmed by Julius II in his Bull of 1505, that a simoniacally elected Pope was no Pope. It is true that on this point

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Savonarola was not always consistent. He recognised Alexander VI as Pope, yet maintained that he was not legitimately Pope; he felt himself bound by the papal excommunication, and then believed that he was not obliged to respect it. But this inconsistency is the result of the tension created by his three-fold fight, in the political field in Florence, in the religious and ecclesiastical field against Rome, and in the ethical and spiritual field against the paganism of the Renaissance. The complication of this titanic three-fold struggle made it hard for Savonarola always to find a consistent synthesis in practical action. But the spirit that he released in the course of the struggle was the Christian spirit, with which he sought to oppose a paganism that had crept into thought and art, into the administration of the Church and into the government of States.

From a certain standpoint, Savonarola can be considered as the last representative of the Middle Ages, which had already closed; as the spiritual heir of Dante and of St. Catherine of Siena. Under another aspect, he was the prophet of the impending Protestant revolt, of the desolation of the Church, and of its renewal. But the truest aspect shows him as the man who sought to solve the problem of the Renaissance in a Christian sense; who did not repudiate but subordinated to the conception of religious life all that the new experience of Greco-Roman classicism was gaining in the domain of culture, art and social activity. He sought to purify art, to make Christian ethics the inspiration of politics, to affirm a freedom united with religious discipline, to raise the Church above earthly passions, not detached from the world nor alien to it, but quickening the whole of earthly life. He has wrongly been called a forerunner of Luther, by those who confused his active asceticism with the passive asceticism of the Reformers, taking his struggle against Alexander VI for a denial of the Papacy, and his bonfire of vanities and sermons against the Florentine carnivals for a condemnation of art. All these are errors in historical perspective. Savonarola had nothing in common with Luther, he was the prophet of the Renaissance, and to his mission he sacrificed himself.

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His condemnation, produced by political passions and not by religious motives, while it brings out the spiritual character of his mission, is typical of fifteenth century manners. He is forsaken by his followers and given up to his enemies, tortured physically and morally, judged by hostile judges on confession falsified by bought notaries, doomed to death at any cost because he is troublesome to the Government of Florence and to that of Rome. In a period of unprecedented violence, of poisonings, murders, and betrayals of every kind, like the fifteenth century, the condemnation of the prophet and ascetic to a pre-arranged and unjust death did not stir even the people that for years he had drawn after him to the vindication of its own liberty and political personality and to the defence of its interests. Even the friars of St. Mark repudiated him. Florence would fall once more under the Medicis. Only a few faithful ones would remember him and seek to vindicate his memory. Thus his sacrifice was entire in every sense.

Something profound and perennial remains of the activity and personality of Savonarola, and this would be ineffaceable. It is not his protest against a Pope of the type of Alexander VI, nor the resurrection of the Republic of Florence and the defence of civic liberties and the democratic system against the tyranny of the Medicis. It is his transportation of all this on to the plane of an impassioned spiritual affirmation of Christianity against the paganism of the Renaissance, the vindication of asceticism as against the theoretical and practical hedonism that has spread from the courts to the people and invaded the sanctuary; the vindication of a politics, an economy, an art, vivified by religious ethics. His thought was soaked in Thomism, warmed by a breath of Platonism—a Thomism not of outward form but of substance, in its effective realism, its ethical and social oneness, its ontological and finalistic transcendency, in contrast to the pantheistic naturalism that was creeping into ethics, politics and art.

NICOLO MACHIAVELLI did not understand Savonarola and thought him a fanatic. He himself believed in "working truth," as he called it, implying what was later known as

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raison d'état, and as *realpolitik* in our own time. For him politics were the art of domination. The end of the tyrant was the rule to which the ends of subjects had to be subordinated. All means were good to this end; if they were honest means, so much the better, but if dishonest means could serve, they were not to be set aside. Religion was good as it kept the people quiet. Morality was useful as it contributed to general prosperity, but over and above morals and religion stood politics in the widest sense of the word, with all that it required to serve its ends, economy, culture, and art.

In paganism the calculated absence of all higher ideals was never so complete as in Machiavelli's political conception. He preached the separation between ethical life and politics, between the ends of individuals united in a society and the end of the Head of the State as a single person above all. The coincidence of such ends in the conception of the prosperity, order, security and greatness of the State is only the complete resolution of the ends of the subjects into those of the head. Subordination to the head is neither ethical nor social, but purely political in the sense of utility. If virtue is useful, virtue is to be practised; if crimes are useful, crimes are to be committed. Machiavelli has no love for crimes, but if they lead to success, he admires their results.

By eliminating any transcendent idea to which individual and social life could be directed as a duty, and indeed, by subordinating individual life to a collective advantage represented by the prince; by depriving the head of the State of the basis of moral and juridical legitimacy and putting in its stead merely that of power, success and personal advantage, Machiavelli, in the political domain, drew the final consequences of the pagan spirit of the Renaissance. Immanentist naturalism leads to individual hedonism, which always resolves itself into the hedonism of an *élite* with the sacrifice of all the rest. And this in politics leads to oppression and tyranny.

The Renaissance was never so ultra-pagan (paganism never suppressed the voice of morality) as to impose silence on all noble sentiments and all humane and religious ideals.

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Machiavelli, although he was the theorist of the man of politics of the fifteenth century, knew the truth and felt the urge of lofty sentiments as inspired by the family, the fatherland, freedom, and even religion itself, which he called upon on his death-bed, like so many of his time. But the concrete was then the goal of a reaction against "abstractionism" and this concrete presented itself with the predominant aspect of a naturalism absorbing into its reality even vice and evil, bringing an inducement to estimate evil as no evil and vice as no vice, in an effort to transpose all spiritual values on to the plane of a so-called *"working truth"* (la vèrità effettuale).

The opposition between the conception of the real and of the ideal was prolonged throughout the whole of the Renaissance and generated two extreme currents: that of the two-fold truth, which had already had its theorists in the Middle Ages, of a natural, humanistic, experimental, *working* truth, and of a truth transcendant, spiritual, religious and dogmatic; and a second current that resolved all objective truth into the thinking subject, whose judgment should be free from the interference of any extraneous authority, in personal relationship with God. Such relationship would synthesize the permanent and irrepressible dualism in man between belief and practice: the faith that justifies without works. The representatives of these two currents are Pomponazzi in Italy and Luther in Germany.

The intermediate philosophical and religious current, in the struggle that began during Machiavelli's life-time between Catholicism and the two extreme currents, remains that of Savonarola, though without the prophetic and political character that he gave to it. It is the current that seeks to assimilate from the other two all that does not contrast with Christian tradition, and that corresponds to the needs and aspirations of the thought, culture and art of the Renaissance.

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