

POWER AND
IMAGINATION

CITY - STATES IN
RENAISSANCE ITALY

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CHAPTER VI

THE COURSE OF URBAN VALUES

URBAN SPACE AND PERSONALITY

Cities and the problems of cities have haunted the European imagination since the twelfth century. Already then cities routed imperial armies in northern Italy and were in turn reconquered or razed to the ground, only to spring forth again a few years later—larger, more combative, and more populous. Urban vitality seemed at times a function of temporary defeat: strike down a city and you were sure to call forth—at all events in Italy—a still more formidable enemy. The vigor of the inland cities was fully matched by the explosive energies of the seaports.

Citizens (*cives*, *cittadini*) were the full-fledged city folk. They came swiftly to see the world in terms of cities, though these were spots in a boundless expanse of hills and valleys, of wooded and rocky and arable land. Citizens were keenly aware of the countryside: of profitable rural properties, of the quantities of agricultural produce carted into the city, of rustic folk and feudal barons. But power, and hence friends or real dangers, lay chiefly in the neighboring cities, or in leagues among cities and great feudal chieftains. By the later thirteenth century, we already find writers—and the overwhelming majority come from cities—casually skipping over the importance of the vast rural spaces in order to emphasize the regional pull and clout of cities. This emphasis issued from passionate local attachments and feelings. Down to the end of the Renaissance, men counted themselves especially fortunate to have been born or brought up in a celebrated city, with its brilliant history and civil advantages, rather than in a subject town or rural hamlet. This was the feeling as much of thirteenth-century chroniclers as of fifteenth-century humanists.

In the 1260s, in his long didactic poem *Il Tesoretto*, Brunetto Latini sketched a revealing picture of the proper way for a mounted gentleman to enter a city:

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When going through cities,
Go, I advise you,
In a stately manner [*cortesemente*].
Ride handsomely,
Head slightly bowed.
It's not urbane
To move without restraint.
And don't stare at the height
Of every house you pass.
Guard against moving
Like a man from the country;
Don't squirm like an eel,
Go self-assuredly
Through the streets and people.
[ll. 1805-1818]

The image of the "hick" had appeared. Latini was addressing an audience which aspired to have the designated restraint and bearing. One of the key words, *cortesemente*, hints at the world of noble courts, but the setting is actually urban and upper-class, Latini's own world. To the same setting, too, writers were already bringing detailed rules regarding table manners.

The most sophisticated political chronicle of the whole period, Dino Compagni's Florentine *Cronica* (written 1310-1312), following a terse announcement of intention, begins with a statement of Florence's place in Tuscany. Straightway the chronicler puts Florence in its geographic relation to the neighboring cities—Pisa, Lucca, Pistoia, Bologna, Arezzo, and Siena—and provides the location and distances of five other fortified towns and castles. These, he notes, and the surrounding lands "have many noblemen, counts and captains [feudal lords], who love Florence in civil disorder rather than in peace and who obey her more from fear than from love." Compagni's field of observation takes in (1) the major cities, (2) the main towns and fortresses, and (3) a muffled perception which contrasts city and country, while alluding to the anarchic psychology of feudal noblemen.

The dynamic contrast between country and city lasted beyond the Renaissance period but was first roundly articulated in the thirteenth century, when urban Italians already measured historical reality in terms of cities. The upstart custom of buying up rural estates and abandoning the city for the country was seen in western and northern Europe, and then only in part; never in central or upper Italy, whose wealthy urban families acquired or maintained large estates but rarely deserted the city for more than two or three months a year.

Dante wrote a lost poem on the sixty most beautiful women of Florence. He had seen them all and quite likely named them in the poem. We cannot imagine the like today. The contrast suggests the personal, close quality of life in the early urban space, the daily contacts and face-to-face encounters

guaranteed by the confined streets, bridges, and squares of the late-medieval and Renaissance city. Women of the upper classes, like Dante's Beatrice, were chaperoned in the streets, but encounters were unavoidable, and even the most ephemeral were not necessarily void of meaning. This indeed, for social history, is the significance of Dante's fleeting encounters with Beatrice. He sees her, they exchange glances, and he turns the experience into a long-remembered vision.

Life in the Italian walled-in city of about 1300 went on in a tight world of personal relations and public settings. Gossip and rumor rippled back and forth across the warp and woof of close family ties, inherited family friendships and animosities, numerous street acquaintances, and peripheral contacts that were endlessly being renewed. These relations were especially dense for the rich citizens in politics, because such bonds were multiplied and vitalized by property and influence. Guido Cavalcanti (d. 1300), in his most intimate moments, had his poetry to think about; but he also thought about the mortal enemies of the Cavalcanti family, the Donati, and he and Corso de' Donati made attempts to assassinate each other.

Late-medieval cities outside of Italy also provided the environment for close spatial and personal relations, but there were major differences too. The preeminence of families in the Italian cities merged with the power of government almost as a matter of course. As from the late twelfth century, moreover, local power in urban Italy was well on its way to being absolute: those who disposed of local political authority disposed of the power of life and death over every citizen and subject, and that power was often harshly used in political emergencies. The merger of private interest and public authority thus raised the importance of personal relations inside the city to a new order, particularly among members of the upper classes. In this, other European cities offered little competition.

The personal-public texture of life in the Italian commune lies beyond anything in our experience, but we catch glimpses of that vanished reality in the age's lyric poetry, which teems with personal allusions, apostrophes, references to streets, direct discourse, and dedications to friends. These caught the public element in private experience: they made rhetorical demands on poetry, giving it, in its immediate accessibility and communicability, a sharper public form. As they wrote poetry, *stilnovisti* such as Dante and Cino da Pistoia, no less than the comic realists Rustico di Filippo and Cecco Angiolieri, continually looked to their friends, or to a circle just beyond, even in verses that seemed addressed directly to the loved one. They wrote with a definite audience in mind, thus answering to the public and "communal" accents in their private experiences, and they frequently entered into sonnet-dialogues with other poets.

To an allegation by Guido Cavalcanti that Cino da Pistoia was guilty of plagiarism, Cino replies with a sonnet beginning, "What are the things I take from you, / O Guido, that you make of me so base a thief?" Dante, Cino,

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Guido, Gianni Alfani, and others exchanged sonnets on the nature of love. The exchanges keep to a particular vision: love of the sort which refines, ennobles, and spiritualizes. The theme is moral, public, and responsible. Alfani sings to the ladies of Venice of his lady ("De la mia donna vó cantar con voi, / madonne da Vinegia"). Others speak to their readers in direct discourse, in praise of the virtues and beauty of their beloved. Guido Cavalcanti summons up a whole street scene with two opening lines: "Who is this coming, drawing the gaze of all men, / as she makes the air one trembling clarity?" And Lapo Gianni lists all good things in one of his most moving sonnets: his lady, his love and youth and happiness, universal peace, the miraculous turning of Florence's great walls to silver and the River Arno to balsam.

Private experience is articulated by means of public evocations. The poetry of Dante's age is never private, never turned away from a context of public meanings. It carries the stamp of communal experience. There was a genre of personal invective, practiced even by the idealist poets (the *stilnovisti*), which heaped abuse on acquaintances—naming them, describing them or their close relatives, providing intimate details, and on occasion savaging them. Dante's three sonnets (ca. 1293–1296) against Forese Donati describe the underwear worn by his rheum-prone wife and make Forese out to be a bastard, a glutton, an adulterer, a thief, and possibly guilty of incest with his sisters-in-law. More than any conventional historical document—statute, letter, deed, or business ledger—such verse conveys a sense of the absence of barriers between private and public life. The most awful personal details easily become public knowledge. Dante's financial distress and his father's alleged usurious practices were loudly bruited by Forese. Antagonists instinctively drew verbal daggers that cut deeply into the personal—an area so special for us that we hedge it in with laws of libel, whereas they shared it with the commune.

No urban Italian could escape the eyes and curiosity, or almost the very need to know, of his neighbors. An adulterous wife might be known in a court of law by the opinion of her neighbors. Such was the intent of certain statutes. Moving through the Florentine rural suburbs in the early morning, Guido Cavalcanti could easily hear the cries of a peasant as he scolded his wife and children. Sounds of this sort were more effectively conducted by the habitat of the city, where narrow streets, lying between high stone constructs, amplified noises and smells, quarrels and conversations. We must strive to comprehend the public-social framework of life along those ways and in the facing rooms and apartments.

For shopkeepers and the mercantile classes generally, domestic life and the money-making trades had a unified existence. Economic and family functions were joined. The separation of the two functions came later, in the course of the fifteenth century, and then only among citizens of the richer sort. The separation, presented as a relatively novel ideal, is clearly

seen in Francesco di Giorgio's architectural treatise (1470s): family rooms and workshop are separated, in part so as to keep women and children beyond the purview of customers and other merchants. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, home and workshop were one; so also home and countinghouse, home and warehouse, home and the part of it facing the retail outlet. Residential quarters on the ground floor gave directly out on the streets, while the large windows of the floor above also took in the nearby spectacle. Home and public world faced each other in a relationship that made for a continuous exchange. A reciprocity not unlike this also characterized the life of poor folk. Enormously high real-estate values determined their physical environment. The really poor hired themselves out as day laborers, odd-jobbers, or pieceworkers on a daily basis. They lived in crowded quarters where an exposed public existence was part of the nature of things.

The same people walked the same streets daily. There was mutual instant recognition. Retail outlets continually put all local people shoulder to shoulder. Servants, sent on errands, reduced such frequent contact for their masters, but even the chaperoned women of the rich had their public space in the parish church and in the streets immediately outside the family residence. Every neighbor had his or her particular identity associated with a trade, a name, a reputation, a clan or family. Strangers were immediately picked out in the streets and doubtless stared at. Births, marriages, and deaths were neighborhood events—for the common knowledge and feeling of all. Wedding parties were shared with neighbors. Funerals were the affair of the neighborhood, and a ritual mourning was provided not only by the women of the bereaved family but also by a host of women from the parish, while kinsmen and other neighbors gathered in front of the house. At Bologna, when an academic procession wound its way to a doctoral ceremony in the cathedral, all shops along the way were shut and afterward the new doctor of laws entertained his neighborhood.

The eyes of the neighborhood witnessed all unusual arrivals and departures. Nocturnal visits could not be perfectly stealthy, perfectly discreet. True privacy had a high price: it belonged to the floors well above and away from the streets; it called for particular care and psychological strain; and it cost money or labor—a large town house or a place in the country, and even then privacy had no security. The strongest personalities were those which were most at home in a public or corporate space.

Thoroughfares were few and customarily ran from the city gates to the cathedral, to the government square, or, where they existed, to the city's one or two bridges. If the byways or smaller streets were neighborhood strongholds, the few thoroughfares were less parochial and more communal in that they collected neighborhood life and plugged it into the larger life of the commune by pointing it toward the city walls, the cathedral, or the courts and government palace. On the thoroughfares, the powerful kinship

groupings (the *consorterie*) got away from their immediate local interests and entered into a larger arena, where the battle for the control of the commune really took place. Here also the rich and prominent—far more than the poor and obscure—occupied a public space, were on show, and were known by their colors or carriage. They were instantly identifiable by their peers and knew themselves to belong to a name, a reputation, faction, or policy—in short, to something that went far beyond the individual. At Florence in 1300, the vivacious and brilliant Corso Donati, leader of one of the two factions, was recognized, said Compagni, wherever he went in the city, and “as he passed through the streets, many used to cry ‘Long live the baron!’” (*Cronica*, II, xx).

As an environment for intensifying the social-communal texture of life, the layout of walled-in streets got much support from the guilds and armed neighborhood societies. Thirteenth-century guilds demanded and got a concrete emotional commitment from their members. Guild statutes called for a spirit of strong mutual aid and solicitude. No one could matriculate in a guild without the personal recommendation and friendship of several other guild members. When a guildsman died, all other members were expected to attend his funeral. They worked together in running the guild; they frequented one another; their families intermarried; they helped other guild families in distress; and they regulated the chosen trade through their consuls and governing bodies. They had their own guildhalls, courts, and guardsmen, and even, in the case of leading guilds, their own prisons. In certain cities, depending upon the violence and frequency of political emergencies, guilds were turned into paramilitary organizations, though these collaborated with, or yielded to, the armed popular societies of the neighborhoods. Where a trade was largely concentrated in a given street or a particular quarter, relations among kindred guildsmen were closer and more constant. They lived in neighboring houses, attended the same parish church, and daily brushed one another in the streets. Guildsmen instinctively looked to their guild for protection and help, for solidarity and for goals. Bakers, wool merchants, and others were militant in their trade claims, at times notoriously so, as in the case of the butchers, whose *esprit de corps* was extraordinary. Living so much of their life in the midst of a bustling community, in an atmosphere of close and confined streets, guildsmen moved and proved themselves in a corporate space, except in cases where the attachment to guild was overcome by the more powerful bonds of family and *consorteria*.

Guilds in the coastal cities were not nearly so formidable as those of the inland cities. At Genoa and Venice especially, guilds were less protective and had a timid or no voice in government. This made family and factional loyalties all the stronger, but did not alter the preponderance of public situations and corporate influences. In the early fourteenth century, the political class in Venice cut itself decisively off from the rest of the com-

munity and turned into a ruling caste. It thus became the city's most powerful corporation, the Venetian nobility. Members were inscribed in its ranks from birth, their names entered into the special books of the nobility. At Genoa about 1300, where the ruling class was thoroughly divided, the dominant factions won more of the loyalties which in other cities were absorbed by the guilds or *popolo*.

The armed companies of the *popolo* included men from most guilds. They kept pretty much to their given neighborhoods and were made up of men selected for their loyalty, fighting skills, and fervor. They introduced a more coherent militancy into the neighborhoods; they put streets and families under a closer scrutiny, and hence more of whatever had been private became public.

The acute political and social strains of the thirteenth century increased the burdens of the guilds, neighborhood companies, and family associations. Fighting ever more urgently for control of the urban space, the different corporate groupings laid a tremendous burden of loyalty upon the individual. He was known, and largely knew himself, by that loyalty. Enjoying no membership in a clan or sworn association, he was friendless, weak, vulnerable, and ill-directed. Inside an association he was bolstered, protected, and surrounded by friends, and had a strong sense of direction. Government was too weak and fumbling to protect him fully, and so he looked to a corporate grouping.

Contemporaries attest to the force of Dante's personality, yet his passions were moored inescapably in community and public matters. His overriding intellectual and moral interests, even in his verse, were the message of Christianity, local and imperial politics, the vernacular language and literature, and the *civilizing* effects of love. He was not the exponent of an in-turned personal and private vision. All his pronouncements had a public ring.

Personal identity in the Italian cities was best realized and delineated in communal, social, and corporate terms. Guilds and neighborhood societies, more than the parish church, furnished the practical moral setting. The intimate streets and squares of the city supplied the corresponding physical setting. But nothing worked so well, in the making of a personal identity, as the appurtenances, name, and psychological resources available to any leading family. Its commanding place in the political system, a system that affected every house in the city; its cluster of imposing houses; its reputed traditions and outlook; the street, square, or neighborhood associated with its name: these all went to fill the individual family member with a sense of his identity. And what is more, his neighbors and more distant peers recognized and paid tribute to that identity. It is no wonder that between about 1250 and 1320 the popular forces were compelled to wage a bitter and bloody campaign against the violence in streets and *piazze* of a whole class of magnates and noblemen, who saw that their identity was gravely threatened and that their day, in many cities, was passing.

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FLORINS: THE BEST OF KIN

Preach what you will,
 Florins are the best of kin:
 Blood brothers and cousins true,
 Father, mother, sons, and daughters too;
 Kinfolk of the sort no one regrets,
 Also horses, mules and beautiful dress.
 The French and the Italians bow to them,
 So do noblemen, knights, and learned men.
 Florins clear your eyes and give you fires,
 Turn to facts all your desires
 And into all the world's vast possibilities.
 So no man say, I'm nobly born, if
 He have not money. Let him say,
 I was born like a mushroom, in obscurity and wind.

This vision of money tells us more about the psychological and moral effects of economics than a panoply of statistical tables. The poet, Cecco Angiolieri of Siena (ca. 1260–ca. 1312), has taken the most powerful emotional bonds, the bonds of family, and cast them in the imagery of money; or rather, he has taken gold coins (florins) and represented them as family in order to demonstrate their force. He is not content to tell us that money can do anything, although he does this too. He uses metaphor to show that money *is* family and better than family; for money not only procures all the world's goods but also gives the emotional and psychological sustenance which hitherto had come exclusively from the family. Opening with a statement about kinfolk and closing with one about ancestry, the verses recycle a set of ardent traditional feelings by attaching them to that new and disturbing value—money. The family is robbed of its resources.

It is impossible for the twentieth-century reader to read Cecco's lines with a sense of shock, anxiety, and instantaneous humorous release—the probable reaction in the poet's time. We take the easy flow of money for granted; we recognize that the sudden influx of wealth can overturn social systems; but we cannot summon the powerful gut feelings, engendered by family, that were a daily reality for urban Italians of Cecco's day. In the thirteenth-century urban context, where family and personal identity were ineffably fused, Cecco's verses must have come as a disturbing flash of outrageous truth. Only a laugh could drain the instant anxiety. He was saying things that were disturbingly true but couching them in exaggeration. In middle- and upper-class Siena and Florence, as at Bologna, Genoa, and Milan, nothing rode higher in the passions of people than family, especially among those who claimed a place in government and politics. But it is also true that for a hundred years and more, urban Italians had seen wild

inflation, the economic ruin of numerous old families, the spectacular rise of new fortunes and families, and the rise of revolutionary new credit mechanisms. Checkered by a rampant instability, the life of cities was best represented either by the image of money and what it could do or by the image, in whatever guise, of bloody contests for political power.

Ambrogio Lorenzetti's frescos of *Good and Bad Government* (Siena, Palazzo Pubblico, 1338–1339) are utterances of hope and distress in a mercurial time. Government in Siena, as in other cities, had constantly to be on the lookout for internal plotters and the machinations of political exiles. In this gravely disturbed world, the idealist poets of the "sweet new style" (ca. 1280–1320) sought a corrective, a range of stable perceptions summed up by a lofty ideal of love. City poets all, and well placed socially, they dreamed of a chaste and knowing and unreal woman: the vehicle of their own intellectual and moral cleansing. She—Beatrice, Vanna, Laggia, or another—provided her devotee with a sense of stability and raised him above the vulgar crowd of merchants, upstarts, and money-grubbers. Through his dedication to her, he entered a new spiritual aristocracy which affected to spurn social nobility (position, blood lineage, and money). The lexicon of the *stilnovisti*, the poets of the new style, conscientiously avoided all words and references denoting any practical or gainful activity. Thus Guinizzelli, Cavalcanti, Dante, Cino da Pistoia, and others. But money was the supreme object of aversion, the one item never to be mentioned in their elevated lyric verse. And we ransack the new style in vain for marginal or passing references, whether in metaphor or simile, to the force that seems to turn their world upside down—money. The result is that its calculated omission makes for its spectral presence. The fact that the *stilnovisti* systematically avoided the imagery of money puts us on the trail of its explosive effect in their overcrowded cities, all the more in that it preoccupied their more popular contemporaries, the so-called "comic" or "bourgeois realist" poets. We are able, in the verses of the realists, to see the psychological impact of a money economy, and we can follow its track in urban consciousness by tracing the appropriate diction in poetry.

Cecco's invasion of the family precincts was a revelation. His contemporaries, he suggests, put everything on a cash basis. This was of course not true, even if they were already drafting punctilious contracts for a remarkable variety of transactions.

After Cecco, for centuries to come, poets and diarists often fused the images of money, family, and friendship. Here is an early example with a devious composition, a sonnet by a Florentine, Pieraccio Tedaldi (ca. 1285–ca. 1355).

The little florins all of gold and silver
Have utterly abandoned me;
Each has gone so far away
As is Fucecchio from Pianoro.

And so I ache and suffer more
Than the sick in bed, for
Not a single florin wants a home
In my cash box, hand, purse, or at my side.
More do I need florins
Than the man with scabby ringworm needs caps.
Day and night I long for them and dream of them,
Yet none wants lodging in my house.
And nought it boots to say that I love florins,
As every one of them's a rebel against me.

The poet turns "little florins" into people and puts them as far from himself as the distance between two country towns. But they are not just people: the only two verbs of the first quatrain (*abandon* and *go*) combine with the verbs of domesticity in lines seven and twelve to indicate that Tedaldi's florins are relatives and friends. Thus converted, their refusal to live with him, or even to be near him, multiplies his grief. He is more wretched than a man with ringworm and so, by implication, people (florins) also flee from that. Still dissatisfied with the effect, the poet suddenly pivots in the last line and converts florins into rebels, while he, by necessary contrast, becomes the suffering commune—the city abandoned by its rebel citizens.

Tedaldi grabs at the emotive resources of family, friendship, and high politics (his society's capital sources of pain) with an eye to reenacting the anguish of being without florins. So doing, he recycles a set of strong traditional sentiments.

Colder and more direct perceptions were not necessarily more truthful, more illuminating. An anonymous Tuscan merchant of the second half of the fourteenth century advised fellow merchants in distant lands to "remember that money is all the help you have. It is your defense, honor, profit, and adornment."¹ But the Florentine diarist Giovanni Morelli, laying down advice to his heirs at the beginning of the fifteenth century, returned to Cecco Angiolieri's vision: "Be sure to have cash on hand at all times. Guard it carefully, and use it wisely, for it is your best friend and relative." By exploiting family feeling, this metaphor attained the highest possible level of persuasion. Next to it stood only a form of sacrilegious expression, such as God is money.

From at least the time of Cecco, then, writers had to dip into the nomenclature of the closest human relationships to illustrate the power and effects of money. No matter what the message of Christianity was, and no matter how men explained their behavior, the urban economy was straining and battering all the old relations and loyalties—guilds, confederations of families, and other associations. These were bombarded, their coherence was loosened, and the individual was gradually stripped of most of his traditional protections; but the process of stripping lasted two or three centuries. So far as Renaissance Italy saw the ascent of "the individual," the causes were not,

as Burekhardt thought, in signorial politics but in the course of urban economic relations, and in the expanding effects of cash and credit mechanisms.

Looking back to the consular commune, we can see that next to piracy and long-distance trade, the large interest-bearing loan was the earliest fast maker of big money. The capacity to make mammoth loans was very often, however, the result of having made innumerable small ones. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries brought the rise and triumph of the credit mechanisms—loans direct and indirect—that would come to characterize and underpin the trade and public finance of the Italian communes. In the thirteenth century, new necessities forced the communes to reappoint their tax structures and to rely increasingly upon the loans of wealthy individuals.² By the 1290s tax farming—auctioning certain taxes—was being turned into ordinary procedure. As moralists feared, florins were becoming the supreme value; and unless poets recoiled from this, as did the *stilnovisti*, they had to construct a new lexicon for getting at the new meanings. Everything from niggling private transactions to the fighting of major wars appeared to take place under the sign of money or the devices of credit and financing. The effect of this brimmed over into whatever there was of private fantasy worlds. Cecco Angiolieri's sonnet on his gloom begins:

Per sì gran somma ho' mpeguate le risa,
che io non so vedere come possa
prender modo di far la rescossa:
per più l'ho' n pegno che non monta Pisa.

("I've pawned my laughter for so much that I can't see how I'll ever be able to redeem the pledge: it's in hock for more than the value/height of Pisa.")

The Sienese poet has pawned his laughter for a sum of money higher than the value and/or height of Pisa, a leading rival of the Sienese. With a single metaphor he knocks Pisa, establishes his gloom, and lets flicker before us one of the age's main sources of profit, usury, and pawn-taking. His language is spare but its resonances are rich. Here poetry's mystifications reveal the age. Attuned to the rhetoric of money, Cecco affixes a pawn ticket to his laughter, thus representing his melancholy in coins. The image speaks for a whole realm of experience: borrowing and lending, profit and loss, investment, risk, and financial crisis—indeed, the world of business.

Between about 1250 and 1350, poets of the realist school are struggling to come to terms with the effects and experience of money. A straining for metaphors is evident in the enterprise, and this suggests a disturbed value system, an effort to get hold of a malady. Tedaldi puts his finger on the sore: "The world is so base nowadays that wisdom and noble stock are worth nothing unless they are mixed with money [*ricchezza*], which condiments and seasons every good dish." And he concludes: "So let him who has money know how to hold on to it, if he wants to avoid being told one day, 'I can't bear the sight of you.'" ³ At about the same time, Niccolò de' Rossi, a

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nobleman from Treviso, also devoted a sonnet to the theme. He earned a doctorate in law at Bologna (1317), became a cleric, and died sometime after 1348. The sonnet "Denari fanno l'omo comparare" spells things out:

Money makes the man,
Money makes the stupid pass for bright,
Money buys the treasury of sins,
Money shows;
Money buys the pleasure-giving women,
Money keeps the soul in bliss,
Money puts the plebe in high estate,
Money brings your en'mies down.
And every man seems down without it,
The world and fortune being ruled by it,
Which even opens, if you want, the doors of paradise.
So wise he seems to me who piles up
What more than any other virtue
Conquers gloom and leavens the whole spirit.⁴

Here all the stops have been pulled out—almost anything goes: God is not money and the tone is a mixture of irony and acid truth, but lines six and eleven join the pecuniary to the spiritual.

Rossi's sonnet and Tedaldi's "The world is so base" pick up a common theme of the period, to be found even in the idealist poets: the theme of the loudmouth, villainous upstart. In Cecco Angiolieri, as in Tedaldi, Rossi, and other realists, the figure of the upstart is always framed in the imagery of ill-got money, earned by usury or lowly trades and pursuits. And here again poetry provides a fresh insight to a major theme.

Over much of central and upper Italy, the chroniclers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries frequently speak of "new men," "new citizens," "new people"—mainly in the context of party politics. Italy had seen the rise of new men in town and country since the tenth century. Not, however, until the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, when they become a distinct historical force, do they figure importantly in the chronicles, and then only, as we have seen, in bloc form, in connection with the ascent of the *popolo*. In the second half of the thirteenth century, with the victory of the *popolo* and the emergence of a strong vernacular literature of didactic bent, the image of the new man is glimpsed more often and in more detail, to the point of his becoming a literary obsession. The result is a view of the upstart not to be found in the chroniclers. For the new man was not just a political force; his numbers were also having an effect on social and moral attitudes. And the poet, with his way of seeing and his preoccupation with the contours of experience, grappled with the nuances, possibly exaggerated the changes, but never forgot that money and upstarts were as one, that underlying the "bad" moral effects of the rich *vilan* or parvenu was the greasy and showy and intimidating power of money.

Two long-term trends served to elevate the rich *vilan* to a place in literature: first, in Tuscany and other parts of north-central Italy, the decline of the old nobility took a sharper fall in the second half of the thirteenth century; and second, in the north, from Genoa to Lombardy and the Trevisan March, the civil wars had knocked down many old houses and the feeling of instability was rife. Money and riches, as profiled in the vigor of the rich *vilan*, thus seemed the one fixed worldly value. No wonder Rossi, Cecco, and the others sing bitterly and longingly of money. Even Dante, not only of course in *The Divine Comedy* but also in his late lyric verse, turns to skewer the moneymen, as in the third *canzone* of the *Convivio*: "riches . . . are by nature base" and "bring only anxiety, not peace." And again in his *canzone* "Doglia mi reca ne lo core ardire":

What have you done, tell,
Blind, undone miser?
Answer me, if you can, other than "nothing."
.
.
.
Damned your wasted bread,
Not even on a dog wasted!
For night and day
You have gathered up and squeezed with two hands
That which so soon is utterly lost.

The sort of men who throw money around are also denied "a place among the worthy." They would be wiser, Dante tells them, "to hold on to their cash."

The way men looked (and look) at money and parvenus was so much a matter of class and point of view that we had better get our perspective right. I have been quoting men who traded in exaggeration, not in fictions—poets. The point is to find and outline the reality lodged in their hyperbolic vision. Certainly we should beware of the snobbery and jealousy present in most indictments of the upstart, for these tell us something about the poet and little about the larger historical reality. It was untrue, as was snobbishly lamented, that all "courtesy," style, and the gentle virtues were disappearing with the decay of the ancient and distinguished houses. In the *canzone* "Dear Florence mine," Matteo Frescobaldi (d. 1348) grieves at the loss of the city's generous and brave qualities:

As long as you were still adorned, O Florence,
by good and ancient citizens and dear,
people far and near
admired the Lion and its sons. [Lion: symbol of Florence]
Touted among even Muslims,
Where you are now the world round.

[ll. 23–28]

This conservative nostalgia for a nobler world is first lyrically heard in the 1260s and will be continually repeated for more than a century.

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A writer from Genoa, working in the 1290s, has three poems on the plebe (*vilan*) who "climbs from lowliness to great prosperity" and attains political office: he is a man void of "measure, grace, and kindness." He can do nothing but harm his neighbors.⁵

Although more than a trace of the alleged graces had existed and persisted, their representation was much idealized by the poets. So much for poetic license. But all idealizations have a root in reality. It is not that noblemen such as the Doria, Visconti, Este, and Tolomei were fine, valiant, and generous, while the merchants and upstarts were coarse, cowardly, and greedy. In many cases the opposite was true. The real point was elsewhere: poets were saying that there was something tougher about the moneymen, something more coldly efficient and more persistent in streets, shops, and personal dealings. The thirteenth century offers conclusive testimony to the fact that merchants were already strictly enjoined to keep careful accounts of all their transactions. Moreover, a whole series of changes touched directly upon the nostalgic ideology of the poets: (1) a powerful class of new men had pushed their way into the political and social foreground by means of money; (2) in many cities money was undermining the old claims of birth and place, so that blood without money lost esteem; (3) rich ignoramuses were now heard occasionally in council, as illiterate knights once had been; (4) the effects of money were felt ever more keenly in an inflationary time of congenial wars; and finally (5) as attested by the performance of its poets, communal society was still struggling to absorb the moral consequences of money and credit mechanisms into its religious view of the world—a view that made a point of downgrading worldly enterprise.

There was a social reality behind the metaphors of the poets, but we need the poets to help us get at it. Their images of money and upstarts can be drawn together to reveal the emerging profile of a new order of values. Snobbery and jealousy aside, the rich *vilan* represented the triumph of commerce in everyday life—of bookkeeping, contracts, credit, and sharper perimeters in personal relations. The moneyman—merchant, speculator, or moneylender—was not greedy or more heartless than men sprung from the grand old houses; he was merely more efficient and predictable. His account books spelled out the quiddities of economic experience, and from these there was no deviating, save in economic irrationalities and excesses of piety. These, indeed, endured in the powerful push and tug of religious feeling, but they came to be part of a surprisingly coherent "system," as we shall see in the following section of this chapter.

There was violence in the acid humor of Niccolò de' Rossi's sonnet "Money makes the man," with its incantatory first eight lines, each starting with the word "money" (*denari*), and the force of the feeling was linked to an economic reality that was transforming values. The fact that personal diatribes in literature could turn on the lack of money, as in Forese Donati's scurrilous exchange with Dante, reveals that poverty easily invited sneers. Only the infamy of sexual perversion or the adultery of women seemed to

equal, in urban society, the dishonor of being without money and possessions—so far had the malady gone, and it was no less present among noblemen who had plunged into commercial enterprise, such as the Spinola, Saraceni, and others. But at least some contemporaries thought they could remember a time when there were fewer account books around and fewer merchants and parvenus at the helm of state.

EXPERIENCE AND RELIGIOUS FEELING: AN ANONYMOUS MORALIST

A consideration of urban values in early Renaissance Italy would be strange indeed without a discussion of religious sentiment.

Residents of cities encountered the Church's presence and promise everywhere. We may begin with the fact that cities were first districted by parish church, and the association of person with parish persisted always. The existential events—birth, marriage, death—were concluded under the seal of religion. A religious oath went with matriculation in guilds and hence underwrote the pursuit of trades. The ideal of chastity, anchored in religious sentiment, was drummed into every girl, particularly among the middle and upper classes. City streets teemed with clerics, and many citizens had relatives in holy orders. In cities unafflicted by the noises and rumble of machines, the reigning and habitual sounds were those of street cries, the clatter of wheels, and the pealing of church bells, but the bells were far the loudest, marking the hours, the sacred offices, and the major breaks in the day.

Artistic subject matter was almost wholly religious: in fresco, panel painting, stone sculpture, and carved wood. Crucifixes and images of the Virgin abounded. All contracts and public transactions began, "In the name of the Lord" or "In the year of the Lord." All cities had popular religious confraternities. Membership in neighborhood societies and associations of noblemen (as well as guilds) was sealed with a solemn religious oath. All serious agreements required an oath, whether in trade, politics, or engagements to marry. The statutes of cities, guilds, and other associations were studded with appeals to God and the saints. Decrees of political exile were frequently read out in church as a first formality. Men began diaries, chronicles, and account books with religious invocations. To live in an Italian city around 1300 was to assess good fortune and bad, and anything unusual, in religious terms. The impulse was automatic. Comets, bankruptcies, earthquakes, and monstrous births were seen as expressions of a divine arrangement; and the devil frolicked everywhere.

Much of what went into religious utterances was probably mechanical: men often follow formulas. Accordingly, sentiment ranged from ecstatic fervor at one extreme to a half-cynical allegiance at the other; but frenzies

of religious feeling and the persistence of passionate heresy were more sensational and more likely to rivet the attention of contemporaries.

Historians have noted occasionally that the thirteenth was Italy's most religious century. This observation squares with the evidence if we bear in mind that religious fervor often appears in tandem with rich social and political ferment. Originally a lynching, the burning of heretics in the thirteenth century was moved by a vision of danger to the whole society, not merely by the fear of unorthodoxy. Religious doctrine was also social doctrine, and, conversely, social thought had a solid religious underpinning. The rush of political and social energies in urban Italy, like its economic and demographic vigor, was greatest in the thirteenth century; hence this was also a century of keen religious agitation and inflamed faiths. Heresy spawned in and around all the upper Italian cities. And just as traveling or fugitive heretics, in the guise of merchants and itinerant artisans, spread their message of rebellion or reform from Asti and Como to Orvieto and Viterbo, almost to the very doors of Rome, so also did the new preaching orders of mendicants—Franciscans, Dominicans, Servites, and others—go among city folk to fight the alleged poison of the heretics. From the late twelfth century, the Cathars (dualists) first, then the Waldensians, and next the Poor Lombards, Umiliati, "Apostles" of different persuasions, and Flagellants all disseminated their heretical doctrines or their ideals of evangelical poverty, repentance, and renewal. No city escaped the taint of heresy, and some—Milan, Vicenza, Florence—were accused of openly protecting heretics. Like orthodoxy itself, heresy knew no class boundaries, though its perimeters were restricted largely to the artisanal world, to the commercial middle class, and to a smattering here and there of the nobility. Mystics and excitable men, such as Gherardo Segarelli, sprung from the poorer ranks of society, were offset by their kind higher up on the social scale—St. Francis of Assisi or the ardent Florentine mystic Umiliana de' Cerchi. Giving herself to charity and the succoring of the poor, Umiliana turned violently against her rich upstart family, secluded herself in one part of the family *palazzo*, and refused to have any contact with them.

But let us consider a less dramatic figure, one who was so much closer to representative views that he comes down to us without a name: Dante's anonymous Genoese contemporary, the Anonimo Genovese, moralist and poetaster.⁸ For he exhibits, to a remarkable degree, the archetypal contradiction of the age: the conflict between the Christian preoccupation with salvation and the spontaneous commitment, in the vitalizing urban context, to the rewards of this world. The Anonimo was a practical man with a mystic turn of mind: he approved fully of commercial venture and almost certainly engaged in it, while yet railing against the attachment to worldly pleasures and the immoderate quest for profits.

Writing between about 1295 and 1311, the Anonimo was born into the upper-middle class of Genoa and possibly had noble connections. He seems

to have enjoyed material comfort, but he criticized pleasure-loving, well-dressed men and their "delicate" ways; and he was equally repelled by upstarts. Since he offered much practical business advice, he was probably a merchant. He held public office in and outside Genoa and was well acquainted with certain members of the powerful Doria clan. His verse reveals a detailed grasp of maritime ways and naval equipment, and so betrays his familiarity with the sea. The Anonimo was a very active member of the religious confraternity of St. Catharine of Alexandria, which left numerous bequests. He was hardheaded, down to earth, patriotic, abreast of current events, and a tough moralist with strong religious feelings—all this, however, in ways that were sometimes contradictory, though without seeming so to him.

In poem after poem, the Anonimo highlights the variety and brevity of human life. His themes are behavior good and bad, sin and redemption, and the terrors of hell. He stresses the vanity of earthly existence but is not led into quietism. On the contrary, he underlines the importance of action for the Christian (LXXXIX):

This wretched life,
finite and brief,
was lent by the Lord
for our useful work
and labor with honor; . . .
But men who live leisurely,
negligent and sleepy,
not working or scarcely,
reviled will be,
cast into prison eternally,
where there's no salvation,
but only weeping and groaning
and a great grinding of teeth.

[ll. 21-36]

The lines may seem childlike, but the author, well versed in religious literature, was far from being so. His rejoinder to the charge of being naive would have cited the vanity of learning and the need of simple folk to be told things simply and directly.

The Anonimo's religious outlook took in a wide range of events and activities, from wars between Genoa and Venice to the payment of workers, the selecting of a wife, and the size and appointment of private houses. In his view, four of the worst sins were: (1) homicide, (2) sodomy, "which is so filthy and grave that anyone who commits it deserves death by fire," (3) hurting poor people or orphans, whom the Lord "claims to Himself," and (4) withholding or refusing to pay money due "to any of your workers." Twice at least, in 1294 and 1298, he celebrated Genoese naval victories over Venice and attributed these to God's favor. The poem on the battle of Curzola (September 1298) he wrote in order to record the event and glorify

God. "Our Lord, by His great goodness, has raised our city of Genoa to great honor and by His power caused the Genoese to be sovereign over the proud Venetians" (XLIX). On learning of the victory, "Nearly all the city paraded, praying that God would bring the fleet back safely and soundly and in prosperity." Which did not keep them from calling the Venetians "scabby bastards" (*tignosi*), who in turn referred to the Genoese as "filthy leprous pigs" (XLVII, 19).

The Anonimo tendered advice on choosing a wife. There were four things to consider (LXXXVIII): the girl's forebears, her customs and habits, her honor, and the size of her dowry. If all these were right, then he advised marriage "in God's name." In another short poem (CXXX) he listed the married woman's ideal qualities: she should honor her father-in-law, love her husband unreservedly, know how to care for the family, know how to manage the household and its material things, and take great care of her honor. Nothing is said about the religious foundations of these qualities; they are taken for granted.

As a moralist, the Anonimo saves his most biting and picturesque indictments for the lovers of money and luxuries, indeed for all people—and he often singles women out—attached to worldly goods and pleasures. His emphasis is ancient and conventional, fully in line with the contempt-for-the-world tradition: he is the clear-eyed Christian reminding his contemporaries of their pilgrimage. But in the process he regales us with images and themes of the time, many garnered from the opulent style of Genoa's leading houses—the Doria, Spinola, Embriaci, and others. He affects pity for the men who take expensive and princesslike wives, wives who insist on wearing ornate dresses, while decorating their heads with pearls and precious stones. They are guilty of symbolic sacrilege (LIII): "Their beds seem altars, decked out for Easter and for Christmas." They keep "a train of lords and knights, courtiers and musicians with whistles and drums" (ll. 62-67). But all "this glory isn't worth a fig" and, compared with death and hell, it "passes in a flash." The Anonimo goes on to draw a picture of the way in which certain men set up house. They want the house "long, wide, high and bright, made of beautiful well-cut stone, fit for soaring windows that give light and a grand brightness." Suddenly everything is reversed (LIII):

But the house where man ends up
Is just the opposite—
short, cramped, low, dark,
void of windows, even slits.
Of earth it's made and under the ground,
and if of stone, little it's worth,
for gain and profit follow not
a handsome tomb.
Thus are gulled
the lovers of this world.

[ll. 150-159]

He almost delights in the belief that big spenders and expensive women are soon enough taken off to their true destiny. Earthly life is not a shadow but it is not the end. This is the Anonimo's most recurrent and basic theme. He is therefore puzzled by the fact that mortals can forget the state of their immortal souls (XXXV): "I marvel greatly at the men who have no knowledge of self, burning away night and day with the desire to heap up silver, gold, and pennies, knowing not for whom; and yet they advise, 'rake the money in!'" He often returned to this incomprehension, to the figure of the man who uses every trick and even violence "to acquire power, possessions, lands, and goods for the sake of his children, thereby condemning himself to eternal damnation" [LX].

This was not thirteenth-century moralistic provincialism but a view based on a Continent-wide assumption about the nature and purposes of human life. And if the age really took the assumption seriously, the Anonimo's shafts were not out of place, not even the one beginning with the lines "I like no woman / who disfigures her face" (LXII). Like many of his contemporaries, he condemned the use of cosmetics, then much favored by women of the upper classes. Genoese society obviously tolerated the use of makeup. Although the Anonimo was strict, he reminded society of its contradictions. He had no trouble seeing makeup as a labor of seduction and the work of the devil. But he was equally critical of "dainty men—precious, vain, undisciplined [*desordenai*], lascivious, and always taken up with oddities and ornaments" (LIV, 138–141). These strictures he balanced with others that thoroughly reflected the snobberies of his class, although they were easily justified on religious grounds. He lashed out against the upstart, the rustic or poor commoner (*vilan*) who made money and rose to high station. It is clear to the Anonimo that such a man is worthy of being reviled because he has risen by hurting his neighbors (LXVII). "I know nothing more callous, nor more wicked, than a lowborn plebe who rises from the depths to great prosperity: he's a man transformed beyond all bounds, full of pride and sins" (CXVII). As we have seen, the image of the parvenu obsessed and upset upper-class urban Italy around 1300.

Moralists seem extreme because they take the prevailing system of values, cast its basic assumptions into the field of practical activity, and so confront society with its contradictions. The moralist sticks out because he speaks out: society resents having to face its ideal premises. This puts the Anonimo in perspective. He was not naive or shrill; rather, his society purported to move from difficult and perhaps impossible premises. For the rest, he could dole out advice with the most hard-nosed of his contemporaries, and here, suddenly, he capsized into contradiction with his Christian tenets. One short poem, "Contra iniurias" (LV), warns: "When you have been injured by someone and you want vengeance, guard lest you give this away. Hold your tongue, all the better to be revenged." Elsewhere (LI) he urges his reader not to lend money, not to borrow, not to be a guarantor,

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and never to conduct affairs without keeping a written record of things. Still other poems repeat these themes.

But his pride in and love of Genoa drove him into the sharpest contradictions. He could not free himself from his society. In a long poem on "The Condition of Genoa" (CXXXVIII), supposedly written for a citizen from Brescia, he abandons himself to his patriotism. The Brescian had reported that in his parts Venice was deemed to be the supreme naval power. Whereupon the Anonimo rushed into an excited description of Genoa's splendors and accomplishments. Amid assertions that God favors and has always defended Genoa, he praises the city's beautiful harbor, palaces, houses, shops, and towers. He celebrates its merchants, seamen, craftsmen, profits, rich diversity of textile goods, wares, spices, large population, colonies, and great fleet of ships. He is a "gut" imperialist: "There are so many Genoese scattered through the world that wherever they go they create another Genoa." Forgetting the moral indignation of other poems, he even praises the dress of Genoese merchants ("each one seems a marquis") and the city's "well-adorned" women who "in truth look like queens." There was no reconciling this eulogy of the earthly city of Genoa with his vision of the heavenly city of God, but he followed with no palinode.

In his long poem on voyaging through the world, "Exposicio de mondo navigandi" (CXLV), the Anonimo takes one of the fundamental Genoese drives, the quest for profit in maritime commerce, and transforms it into the mystery of a spiritual voyage. The first third of the poem is straight advice to Genoese merchants and sailors setting out to sea, with some promptings to prayer both before the voyage and as needed thereafter. More specifically, the advice is directed to ship captains and entrepreneurs, thereby setting its social perimeters. For 140 lines the Anonimo dwells in detail on the ship, its caulking, sails and rigging, on navigation, crosswinds, and the way to conduct business abroad. Then, quite unexpectedly, he passes fully over into allegory: "Every man is a merchant, roaming through the world" (ll. 149–150); and elsewhere, "We are all navigators" (l. 186) and "the heart" is a ship, "navigating where it wishes," so it should be "good and strong" (ll. 189–195). He universalizes the enabling experience—trade—of the Genoese:

Now every man is in the market,
so aim accordingly to get
such merchandise and goods
as bring you peace.
Of many wares both dear and cheap
... the cheap are sins,
and so I say,
had I a thousand ships of inexpensive wares,
I'd still not have a cent,

for honest works alone and virtues
are merchandise of quality.

[ll. 151-162]

Again and again he draws upon the language of commerce and the sea to convey his message of the Christian life as voyage: "I hold every man to be a mariner who never ceases to voyage . . . until his end has come" (ll. 166-169). The sea is "bitter and very deep" and therefore much "like this world." In fact, "The world signifies the sea, which can never be still because of some wind" (ll. 170-173).

Like Cecco Angiolieri, pilfering from the verbal bank of family feelings to convey the force of money in a completely new way, so the Genoese poet raided the imagery of maritime trade to help him deliver his lessons.

The Anonimo's perceptions and diction indicate that he was not speaking for the stay-at-home Genoese: for the great bloc of women, the illiterate petty craftsmen, the neighboring peasantry, nor even the rustics and other obscure men who were sometimes dragooned into Genoese naval service. He was speaking to and for the entrepreneurs, the international merchants big and small who roamed the seas, once even as part-time pirates. They organized expeditions, transported goods, bought cheap and sold dear, risked mortal dangers, developed marine insurance, and lent money or made heavy investments in the enterprises of others. Theological subtleties aside, they answered best to the domineering vision of these lines (ll. 142-147):

All men are their own masters
as long as they have life.
Theirs is the free will to do
what they will, evil or good,
and other creatures live, then,
to serve them.

The long-distance merchants were the apparent makers of Genoa and its overseas colonies. Others served them. The Anonimo tells them to draw up their last wills, to put their affairs in order, to confess often, and to pray hourly, especially when in danger (ll. 267-275). But no lines are more marvelously crude and revealing than those which enable the rich entrepreneur to live with his wealth: "If you want to make good use of your money, give out a lot in charity and do works of mercy for those in need, doing so with discretion and tender compassion." Referring to the charitable giving of money as "merchandise" (*merce*), he sums up his point: "There is good treasure in such merchandise—to give away the sweepings and take in gold, to get an expensive gift in return for a cheap one, for a perishable gift to receive an eternal one" (ll. 251-264).

The Anonimo Genovese poured the experience of the great merchant-mariner into an ethico-religious mold. The result was, in verse as in life, a nervous union of contradictions: of moral austerity and earthly wealth,

economic intrepidity and religious fear, rapacious greed and frenzies of generosity, and a tight shuttling back and forth between sin and prayer. The seventeenth-century Calvinist merchant was more of a piece; his late-thirteenth-century counterpart more of a Manichean, tormented, in the words of the Anonimo, "by our three hard enemies: the devil, the flesh, and the world, which drag the soul down into the deep" (ll. 245-247).